The New Criterion

February 2004

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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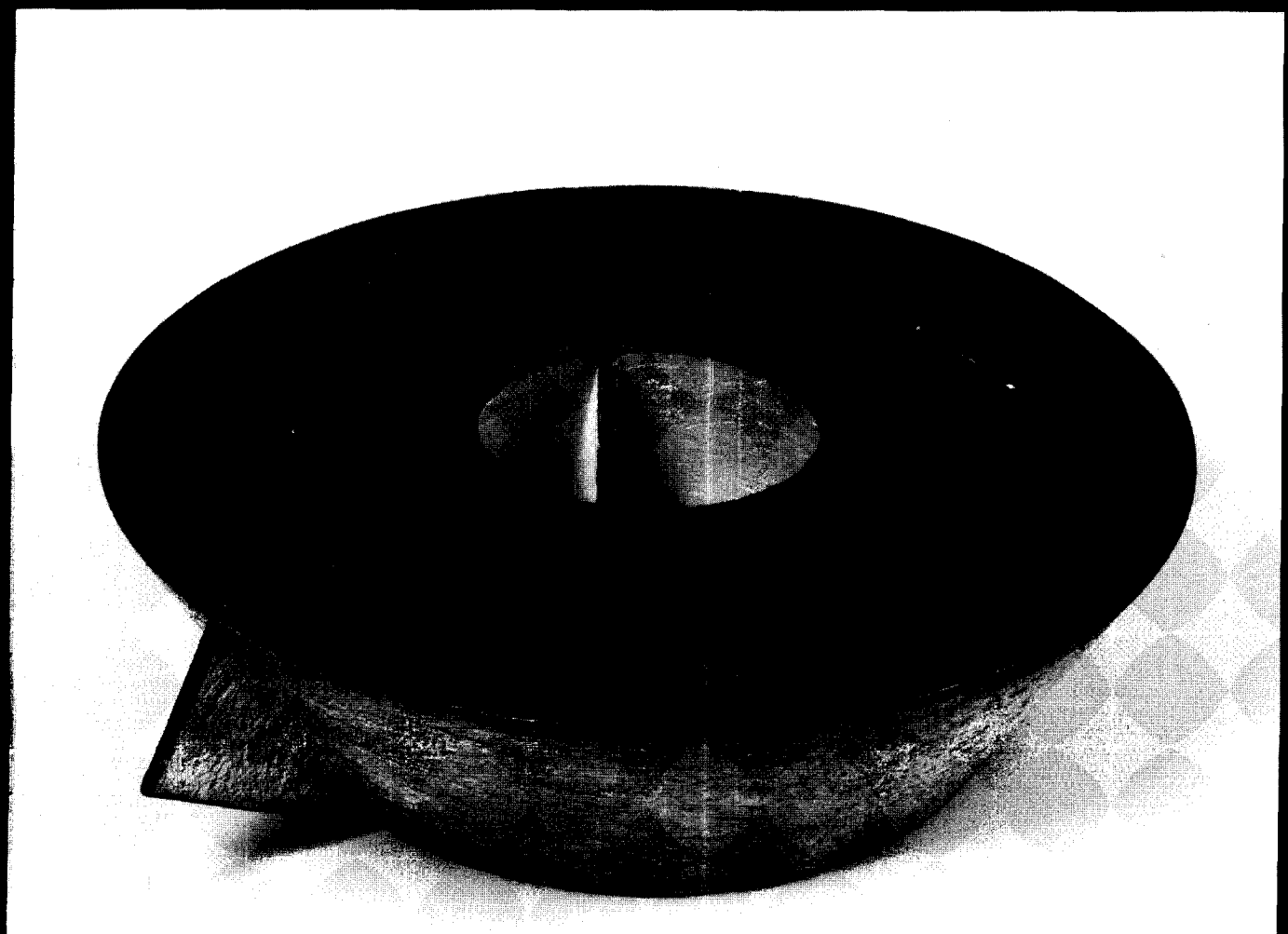

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Notes & Comments: February 2004

Relieving man's estate

In October 2003, the President's Council on Bioethics published *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*. This three-hundred-and-some-odd-page report summarizes the Council's reflections on a wide variety of ethical issues that recent advances in biotechnology—from gene therapy for fetuses to the development of psychotropic and "age-retarding" drugs—have forced upon the public's attention. This volume now has a mate: *Being Human: Readings from the President's Council on Bioethics*.

Each of these books is surely among the most unusual of documents ever to roll off the presses of a government printing office. (Both, incidentally, are available upon application from The President's Council on Bioethics, www.bioethics.gov.) *Beyond Therapy* does address a number of pragmatic questions. For example, health care already accounts for about one-sixth of our GNP; many new and promised biotechnological innovations are immensely expensive: how can we make advanced health care both equitable and affordable? But the real interest of this book lies elsewhere—where the practical and pragmatic meet the spiritual. *Beyond Therapy* is a work of earnest ethical and philosophical inquiry, replete with chapters devoted to such questions as "What Are 'Happy Souls'?" and such subjects as "The Roots of Human Happiness" and "What Sorrow Teaches, What Discontent Provokes." It is not, in other words, your typical farm report, legislative digest, or statistical summary.

Being Human is a source-book for informed reflection on the constellation of issues that *Beyond Therapy* broaches. A plump six-hundred-page chrestomathy of literary, philosophical, scientific, and religious writings, it ranges from Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "The Birth-Mark" to selections from René Descartes's *Discourse on Method* and Kant's ethical philosophy, from writings by contemporary scientists such as E. O. Wilson, Richard Feynman, and James D. Watson to classic passages from St. Augustine, Homer, Tolstoy, the Bible, John Ruskin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Flannery O'Connor, Francis Bacon (the philosopher, not the painter), and many others. It's a rich mélange of a book, traveling over multifarious topics, genres, and moods as well as several millennia.

Together, these books offer a profound meditation on the knot of questions that must be raised before one can make anything like an informed decision about the momentous issues with which our burgeoning biotechnical prowess confronts us. What does it mean to be human? To be a

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finite, mortal creature, tied to the past by traditions and ancestors, to the future by one's tasks, progeny, and aspirations? What is the aim of medicine? The Hippocratic Oath admonishes doctors: "first do no harm." Is that ethical imperative compatible with some common medical practices to enhance fertility or terminate unwanted life through abortion or euthanasia?

The chief mandate of the President's Council on Bioethics is "to conduct a fundamental inquiry into the human and moral significance of developments in biomedical and behavioral science and technology." The Council includes several distinguished scientists, doctors, and scholars. But the tenor of these publications owes a great deal to its chairman, Dr. Leon R. Kass. In *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs* (1985), Dr. Kass meditated on "the relation between the pursuit of knowledge and the conduct of life," articulating along the way many of the principles that *Beyond Therapy* applies to particular ethical problems. No one familiar with Dr. Kass's work will be surprised that *Beyond Therapy* proceeds more in an interrogative than an apodictic tone: "the wisdom-seeking," as Dr. Kass writes, "rather than the wisdom-delivering" spirit. At the same time, no one familiar with Dr. Kass's work will be surprised that the interrogative spirit he adopts is also a troubled spirit: behind the inquiry of *Beyond Therapy* is the concern that "tremendous new biotechnical powers may blind us to the larger meaning of our own American ideals and may narrow our sense of what it is, after all, to live, to be free, and to pursue happiness."

Towards the end of *Beyond Therapy*, in a section of "General Reflections," the authors articulate the underlying view of humanity that guides their inquiry. "When it comes to human biotechnical engineering beyond therapy," they write,

> only if there is something inherently good or dignified about, say, natural procreation, the human life cycle (with its rhythm of rise and fall), and human erotic longing and striving; only if there is something inherently good or dignified about the ways we engage the world as spectators and appreciators, as teachers and learners, leaders and followers, agents and makers, lovers and friends, parents and children, citizens and worshippers, and as seekers of our own special excellence and flourishing in whatever arena to which we are called—only then can we begin to see why those aspects of our nature need to be defended against our deliberate redesign.

Descartes promised that science and technology would some day render man "the master and possessor of nature." By treating nature as material to be manipulated, mankind could gain tremendous power over nature, including human nature. Indeed, Descartes looked forward in particular to great advances in medical science which would free mankind from "an infinitude of maladies both of body and mind, and even also possibly of the infirmities of age." There is clearly a sense in which Descartes's promise is being fulfilled. Antibiotics; organ transplants; genetic screening; anesthetics; drugs to enhance various faculties or diminish various incapacities; cloning; stem-cell research; nanotechnology. The advances have been staggering, and are only accelerating. But at what price? Are there limits that scientists should respect when it comes to manipulating human reality? Francis Bacon looked to science "to relieve man's estate." But what if our power over nature—including human nature—should allow us to *transform* man's estate? Should we intervene not just to relieve "sickness and suffering," but also "such things as nastiness, folly, and despair?" Should improvement be limited to removing evils? Or should it seek to "enhance" people: to improve memory, say, or blunt or erase memory for those who suffer from painful recollections?

Applied to reproductive technology, these were the sorts of questions that Aldous

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Huxley raised in *Brave New World*, a dystopian fantasy that seems less and less a fantasy as "test-tube" babies, surrogate mothers, and genetic screening and (in some cases) modification enter the realm of the practicable and even the commonplace. Huxley imagined a world in which babies were not born but designed according to exacting specifications and "decanted" at sanitary depots like The Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre. It seemed farfetched in 1932 when Huxley wrote. How about today? *Beyond Therapy* quotes a scientist writing in a National Science Foundation report who predicted proudly that

> Future humans—whoever or whatever they may be—will look back on our era as a challenging, difficult traumatic moment. They will likely see it as a strange and primitive time when people lived only seventy or eighty years, died of awful diseases, and conceived their children outside a laboratory by a random, unpredictable meeting of sperm and egg.

"Whoever or *what*ever they may be"?

In many ways, the fundamental concern that underlies *Beyond Therapy* is contained in a question posed by James Watson, the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA: "If we could make better human beings by knowing how to add genes, why shouldn't we?" Had it been expressed in Latin, Watson's question would have used the adverb *nonne* to indicate that it was a question to which the expected answer was "Yes." There is no reason, he assumes, why we shouldn't intervene to make humans "better."

But what does "better" mean? Stronger? Smarter? More disease-resistant? Longer-lived? *Beyond Therapy* articulates the cautionary position that many readers hold:

> We want better children—but not by turning procreation into manufacture or by altering their brains to gain them an edge over their peers. We want to perform better in the activities of life—but not by becoming mere creatures of our chemists or by turning ourselves into tools designed to win or achieve in inhuman ways. We want longer lives—but not at the cost of living carelessly or shallowly with diminished aspiration for living well, and not by becoming people so obsessed with our own longevity that we care little about the next generations. We want to be happy—but not because of a drug that gives us happy feelings without real loves, attachments, and achievements that are essential for true human flourishing.

In the preface to *Being Human*, Dr. Kass notes that the term "bioethics" was coined in 1970 to describe an ethics based on biology, on the scientific facts that explain life. But he pushes the term in a different, a deeper, direction, understanding by bioethics "an ethics in the service of *bios*—of a life lived humanly, a course of life lived not merely physiologically, but also mentally, socially, culturally, politically, and spiritually."

It is often said about technology that "if it can be done it will be done." Perhaps so. But the reflections contained in *Beyond Therapy* and *Being Human* encourage us to refuse a further step: the step of saying "if it can be done it *may* be done."

Being Human opens with Hawthorne's "The Birth-Mark," which tells the story of Aylmer, a dedicated "man of science," who marries Georgiana, a beautiful woman whose physical perfection was marred (if it was marred) only by a birthmark on her cheek. ("It has been so often called a charm," Georgiana says, "that I was simple enough to imagine it was so.") Aylmer persuades his wife to let him try to remove the stigma. At last he devises a potion that does the trick. Georgiana wakes from her drug-induced swoon, sees that the birthmark is vanishing, and seeks her beloved husband's face.

> "My poor Aylmer!" murmured she.
>
> "Poor? Nay, richest, happiest, most favored!" exclaimed he. "My peerless bride, it is successful! You are perfect!"
>
> "My poor Aylmer," she repeated, with a

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more than human tenderness, "you have aimed loftily; you have done nobly. Do not repent that with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best the earth could offer. Aylmer, dearest Aylmer, I am dying!"

Alas! it was too true! The fatal hand had grappled with the mystery of life, and was the bond by which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame. As the last crimson tint of the birthmark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek, the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight. Then a hoarse, chuckling laugh was heard again! Thus ever does the gross fatality of earth exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence which, in this dim sphere of half development, demands the completeness of a higher state. Yet, had Alymer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial.

Will we have the wit to avoid Aylmer's fate? That is one of the questions these profound works invite us to contemplate.

Voting at the MLA

Last month we reported on various proposals scheduled to be presented at the Delegate Assembly meeting at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association for 2003. As we noted, four of the five proposals were submitted on behalf of the Radical Caucus in English and Modern Languages. It was a pretty predictable menu. One called for the repeal of the U.S.A. Patriot Act. Another called upon the MLA to denounce "government war-making projects." Etc., etc. The pièce de résistance was the proposal that called on the MLA to support its members "in conducting critical analysis of war talk, in public forums and, as appropriate, in classrooms." In other words, as we pointed out, this proposal demanded that the MLA condone turning the classroom into a forum for ideological indoctrination. Our deadline was a couple of weeks before the MLA convention took place, so we were unable to share the results of the vote with our readers. Not that the outcome was in any doubt. *Of course* the MLA would adopt the anti-Bush, anti-war, programmatically pro-Leftist line. The only question was by what margin.

Our policy of never setting foot inside another MLA conference (See "Farewell to the MLA" in our issue for February 1995) precluded witnessing the results first hand. But other reports were soon available. *The Boston Globe*, for example, began its piece by noting "a surprising number of sessions dealing with the war in Iraq, terrorism, patriotism, and American foreign policy." "Surprising"? The poor chap reporting the story obviously went in thinking that an annual conference of the Modern Language Association would be devoted primarily to —well, to language and literature. Fat chance. There wasn't, the *Globe* reported, "much actual debate."

> In more than a dozen sessions on war-related topics, not a single speaker or audience member expressed support for the war in Iraq or in Afghanistan. The sneering air quotes were flying as speaker after speaker talked of "so-called terrorism," "the so-called homeland," "the so-called election of George Bush," and so forth.

Yes, and remember the "so-called" World Trade Center?

When it came time for the Delegate Assembly to vote, the resolution supporting "critical analysis of war talk" in the classroom won by a margin of 122 to 8, or a little better than 15 to 1. It is, we think, worth bearing that in mind the next time you hear an academic declaring his allegiance to "diversity," "pluralism," and "openness" to alternative points of view.

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Lengthened shadows: VI

Tending the gardens of music

by Jay Nordlinger

America may be a young country, but it fairly dominated music in the twentieth century. When I say music, I mean classical music, but the statement applies equally to popular music—maybe even with more force. Think of Gershwin, Rodgers, Porter, and the jazz greats, just for starters. It all went wrong in about 1970—you're free to pick your own date—but that is another long, sour essay.

In classical music, America's strength is little short of astonishing. We are talking about a European art form, which the United States embraced with gusto. When the Declaration of Independence was signed, Mozart was already twenty; America had a lot of mud (and political genius and some other things). By the Civil War, we had little to commend us but Louis Moreau Gottschalk. But by the end of World War II, we were rolling.

Of course, Europe helped us immensely, by persecuting—when not trying to kill—so many of its people. America grew to dominance in classical music partly by default, as it did in other areas. Conductors like Reiner, Szell, and Solti may not have chosen to have American careers, but those were the careers they wound up having. Our musical institutions were built on the talent and drive of European émigrés. And those institutions are healthy now, despite clamorous claiming to the contrary. Will they continue to be healthy—even dominant—as the twenty-first century progresses? Probably so, as long as America remains welcoming, ambitious, and free.

To remark the preeminence of America is not to say that Europe is nothing—not at all. Vienna is still a worthy music capital, and Berlin has much to offer, and so does London, not to mention numerous smaller places, such as Oslo. But the United States is still the place where the action is, where big careers are made, where music-making is most predictably excellent—in the orchestral hall, in the opera house, and elsewhere. An acknowledgement of this should have no odor of chauvinism whatever; it is a matter of objectivity. Music is a universal, not a national, enterprise anyway, and people from all over the world come to America to make music, rendering this activity not so much American as human.

The death of classical music is frequently proclaimed, and it has ever been thus. As Charles Rosen once wrote, "The death of classical music is perhaps its oldest tradition." The arguments in favor of death (if you will) are so tired and weak they are hardly worth confronting anymore. But we are usually drawn in. In my experience, some people actually enjoy predicting, or announcing, the death of classical music, because, when they do, others are apt to nod sadly and knowingly. To proclaim the death of classical music marks the proclaimer as a defender of civilization, and a foe of the destroyers.

One who doggedly counters the death

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idea is Gary Graffman, the pianist and director of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He was even moved to title a recent speech "Dead Again"! He noted that he kept having to give essentially the same speech, because prophecies of doom would not let up. "Disaster is always just around the corner," he said. But "one advantage of having reached the age of pontification"—Graffman is in his mid-seventies—"is that I actually *lived* through experiences identical to those which are now considered unique to our present philistine conditions." He went on to give multiple examples, many of them amusing. Consider this: In 1961, RCA Victor wanted Horowitz to record an album of popular music. His wife, Wanda—the daughter of Toscanini—shouted to an executive, "Better you should open a whorehouse!" RCA canceled the pianist's contract. Somehow, he survived.

When Graffman was coming up, the music business was puny compared with today. In the late 1940s, "there were only two major concert managements, with a total of about 40 pianists between them." In 2001, *Musical America*—a professional bible—listed 624 pianists. "So maybe we should be worrying more about glut than decline." Moreover, at mid-century, "New York had only one large concert hall, and—believe me, because I was there—very few performances were anywhere near sold out." For Horowitz, Rubinstein, and Heifetz? Yes. But for Serkin, Milstein, and Piatigorsky, Carnegie Hall was not even half full. No one thought this condition odd or alarming. Indeed, "a half-empty (or half-full) hall" was "the norm."

Zarin Mehta is eloquent on the subject of glut, as he is on other subjects. (Mehta is the executive director of the New York Philharmonic, and the brother of the conductor Zubin.) "If people think that classical music was healthier in earlier decades," he says, "they should investigate how many seats were available then versus now." The success of classical music in the 1960s and 1970s, when orchestras became full-time instead of part-time, "led to an explosion in every city"—and not just large ones, but simple burbs. Communities wanted their own orchestras. "Many, many more seats became available for classical music." So "if ticket sales are deemed soft today, perhaps it's a question of supply."

I will take a little tour of the American music world, looking in on various facets. But here is a basic point: How you think classical music is doing depends, in large measure, on what your expectations are. If you expect classical music to be as popular as popular music, you will be sorely disappointed. As I frequently have cause to say to people, "That's why they call it popular music, you know." There will always be a type that can't stand that the broad public fails to share his concerns, passions, loves.

Classical music will always be, as it has always been, a minority taste. But the minority—lucky us—has an abundance before it.

Many such people have an evangelizing, proselytizing spirit—they can hardly sleep at night knowing that their neighbors prefer musical dross to gold. They will not reconcile themselves to the fact that classical music will always be, as it has always been, a minority taste. But the minority—lucky us—has an abundance before it.

The great mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne said to me, in an interview, "Classical music is under assault in this country." This is an understandable—if strikingly dark—point of view, for in some ways we are slipping. For example, music education in grades K through 12 has all but ceased. And the song recital—a major Horne concern—is dismayingly rare. But in other respects, we are going gangbusters: Chamber music has exploded, for instance. You can hardly walk a block without encountering a chamber-music concert, or festival. As Gary Graffman pointed out to me, there used to be

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only the Budapest String Quartet, and its most prominent member, Alexander (Sasha) Schneider, liked to recall, "Vee vent by bus." Now there is a comparatively huge number of musicians who make a living in chamber music, and they don't go by bus.

Even in areas where we seem to be distressed, the news is mixed. The recording industry is currently moribund, but why? Because the record stores are groaning with albums already made. Never has so much music been available to so many, and so cheaply. As Zarin Mehta commented, "I started buying records when I was sixteen or seventeen. I don't go to record stores anymore, because I have essentially everything I want. Do I need a fifth recording of the *Ring* cycle?" Furthermore, the Internet is now seen as a great robber of recordings, but it may prove a boon to music in the future. In addition, musicians are making CDs in their own homes or studios, at little expense, and selling them to interested parties.

So the business of music will evolve, as it always has. We may not be able to foresee its forms—but we can count on musical life.

For orchestras, times have changed dramatically since mid-century. Then, you could hardly make a living as an orchestral musician, even in the best orchestras. "The men," as they were called, had to sell shoes, paint houses, and do other odd jobs in the summer, just to make ends meet. A fifty-two-week contract was only a dream; it is now an entrenched reality. To work in an orchestra is not to take a vow of poverty; pay in one of the big orchestras begins at about $100,000 a year; it soon rises.

Even aside from the top orchestras, there is an embarrassment of riches. Jack McAuliffe, chief operating officer of the American Symphony Orchestra League, reports that there are about 1,800 orchestras in the fifty states. Of these 1,800, about 600 are either youth, conservatory, or collegiate orchestras. They are "important for the development of both orchestras and audiences," says McAuliffe, "but they aren't necessarily a factor in discussing the economics of orchestras today." Of the remaining 1,200 "adult" orchestras, "you have orchestras in which everyone is paid, and, at the other end, orchestras in which no one is paid. Of the 1,200, about 350 fall into the category of professional orchestras, where the majority of members are paid, and participating for professional reasons, not merely for enjoyment."

In the past couple of seasons—since September 11—orchestras have had trouble, as many businesses and other enterprises have. But, as McAuliffe notes, the decade of the 1990s was "probably the best ever for orchestras, with record attendance." About 32 million seats were filled in the 2000–01 season, up 16 percent from ten years before. "During the late '90s," that roaring time, "virtually every orchestra was showing at least a small surplus, with many in the process of building substantial endowments—and the ones that had them already were increasing them."

Since 9/11, we have, again, been in a "much more challenging time." Most orchestras are worrying, but they are succeeding—because they are knuckling down. "Of the 350 professional orchestras," says McAuliffe, "we're aware of eight that haven't made it—that have either ceased operations or filed for bankruptcy. That is a failure rate of three-quarters of 1 percent a year. For most industries, that would be downright enviable." But, if a couple of orchestras stumble, the media tend to play it in death-of-classical-music tones. To be sure, says McAuliffe, the failure of an orchestra is no fun for that orchestra's community, but part of economic life is that some institutions fail—and then, perhaps, recover, get reconstituted, as has happened with many orchestras. In the late 1980s and early 1990s—another difficult period—eight orchestras went under (by coincidence, the same number that would succumb a decade later). In time, however, each of those eight communities gained an orchestra of approximately the same size and scope of the one it lost. For example, the Denver Symphony came back as the Colorado Sym-

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phony. The orchestra in Birmingham came back as the Alabama Symphony. Etc. In most such cases, the same basic group plays under a new name, and under different governance.

Quite recently, Pittsburgh suffered a bankruptcy scare. The orchestra there is superb, bearing a storied past. But through the years, the PSO was not supported much by the community at large—that is, with donations—because a few prominent citizens, most of them named Heinz, took care of it. Pittsburghers in general did not have the sense that they needed to contribute in order to have an orchestra. But the prospect of bankruptcy jolted them awake—and they responded with their contributions, utterly unwilling to see their orchestra expire, or even flag.

McAuliffe sums up: "Orchestras are still a robust part of the artistic life of an awful lot of communities. In fact, they are often centerpieces of that artistic life, forming the basis of opera companies, dance companies, music education in schools" (such as it is).

Music education in grades K through 12 has all but ceased. And the song recital . . . is dismayingly rare. But in other respects, we are going gangbusters.

Orchestras will never "just work," without effort—"it really takes dedication." But "interest is this art form isn't dying; it's just an expensive form of art to support."

Not only are today's orchestras robust, they have sturdy homes to live in—in many cases, new ones. Listen to Robert Harth, executive and artistic director of Carnegie Hall: "To those who would sing the swan song of classical music's death, I would point to the fact that the most talked about building on the planet was built for classical music." Harth made that statement in October 2003, and he was speaking of Disney Hall in Los Angeles, designed by Frank Gehry. "It's a magnificent building, a life-changing building, not just for the L.A. Philharmonic, but for that entire city. And that makes a dramatic and positive statement about classical music." Jack McAuliffe would point to Newark, too—yes, Newark: "The New Jersey Performing Arts Center was built in the middle of nothing, and it has spawned all sorts of development. It is now a pleasant experience to go to Newark. I guarantee you that wasn't the case ten years ago." And "the New Jersey Symphony is thriving."

Other new halls include the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, Benaroya Hall in Seattle, the Max M. Fisher Center in Detroit (nicknamed the Max), the Meyerson Center in Dallas, Bass Hall in Fort Worth, Jacoby Hall in Jacksonville, and the Schuster Center in Dayton. Robert Harth adds, "Atlanta is building a new concert hall, and Toronto just redid theirs. Severance Hall in Cleveland has been completely revamped. This is 'dying'?"

But Marilyn Horne sounds a cautionary note. In Greenville, South Carolina, they built the Peace Center, a fabulous performing-arts complex. (It is named for a philanthropic family named Peace, not for the concept.) The center "has a recital hall, a concert hall, and extraordinary acoustics," says Horne,

> but, as the man responsible told me, "It's easier to raise money than to put a body in a seat." So what did he have to bring in, to put bodies in the seats? *Les Miz*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and so on. There's nothing wrong with bringing those pieces in, but it's not classical music, and that is worrying.

It is, indeed: but, in 2003–04, the Peace Center had not only *Les Miz*—and *Seussical*, for that matter—but the Emerson String Quartet (part of this chamber boom I mentioned).

A second cautionary note comes from Sedgwick Clark, editor of *Musical America*.

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He is concerned about the cost of all this music building. "We must take stock of what we're spending, and control our costs. I look at Disney Hall, and it's an extraordinary thing, but it's going to cost an arm and a leg to maintain." At Disney, "the cheapest seat will be $35. To sit in the orchestra will be $120. For a concert! Maybe I've just gotten old, but the fact of the matter is, $120 for a concert—how many CDs can I buy for that amount? This is a serious problem." Our new orchestral halls are impressive, Clark notes, but "if they're not sold out, or close to sold out, the orchestras have a terrible time." There are those generous salaries to look after, and employee benefits, and pension plans.

Fundraising in music is a special art. Beverly Sills knows quite a bit about it, and about fundraising in general. "I raised $100 million for the March of Dimes," she informs me,

> and hundreds of millions for other charities. Medical causes do better than music. If you have some disease to cure, you're not going to want to fork over millions for another production of *La Bohème*. But I say in all my speeches: "Art is the signature of civilization." We dance for joy, our hearts sing. When we're little children, we take crayons and know immediately how to scribble. When my husband and I moved into a new apartment, the first thing we did, poor as we were, was paint the walls and hang up Mama's pictures. In the car, we want the radio on. We don't want to be in a silent ambiance.

So she tells her audiences that the arts are not a luxury, and they—at least for her, a woman hard to turn down—come through.

Mention of Beverly Sills leads us to the opera. It's not easy to be gloomy about this slice of music, no matter how hard you try. Marc Scorca, the president of Opera America, supplies the essential facts: In the second half of the twentieth century, opera in the United States grew enormously—it was practically a boom. Opera America now has 115 member companies; there are companies in all but a handful of states. Aside from these, "there are many smaller, community-based endeavors, and lots of university and conservatory opera programs that put on performances for paying audiences." Of the 115, fully three-quarters have been established since 1960.

Understandably, opera is "the most expensive of the traditional performing arts," as Scorca says. "One of the reasons we see opera-company formation as a relatively recent phenomenon is that the financial and infrastructural requirements of opera are considerable: It takes a long time for a community to have a critical mass of audience members and donors prepared to sustain a company. You can't put on an opera very spontaneously." No, you have to have a chorus and an orchestra; you need technicians, stagehands, a costumer, a stage designer—and that's not even mentioning the soloists. Plus, opera "is traditionally performed in a theater with an orchestra pit, and not every community has one of those. You can put on a play with two characters in a store front. You can have a dance program in a loft, as long as it doesn't have too many pillars." But opera is a formidable undertaking.

Therefore, the public must want it, for these companies to be born and to succeed. Scorca explains that opera is "a multimedia art form in a multimedia world." It includes texts, visual images, drama, often dance—"and these components are very much part of our popular culture." Opera

> doesn't ask you to sit and enjoy a purely auditory experience. It involves you in every way that other contemporary entertainments involve you. As people seek a classical-arts experience that is still based on the multimedia sensory experience they have enjoyed in the popular culture, opera is the classical art form they can respond to.

One boost to opera was the advent of titles—supertitles, seatback titles, those lines of words that help an audience member understand what's happening onstage. Says

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Beverly Sills, "I worked very hard to bring titles into the opera. Jimmy said, 'Over my dead body.'" (That would be James Levine, artistic director of the Metropolitan Opera.) But titles came to the Met, to the satisfaction of most everybody, and with Levine still breathing in the pit. Marc Scorca confirms that titles made for "a huge improvement in reaching out to new audiences."

Never has so much music been available to so many, and so cheaply.

Before, there was always a severe language barrier to overcome. Now people do not sit flummoxed (except by plots and other operatic strangeness). Some traditionalists maintain that titles break an important visual connection to the performer—and they are right—but most of us judge it a sacrifice worth making.

The reigning house in America, of course—and in the world—is the Met. It has no real rivals, as its general manager, Joseph Volpe, points out (not boasting); it is a unique institution. There are other companies as renowned—La Scala in Milan, Covent Garden in London, the Staatsoper in Vienna—but no one company that does as much. Volpe notes that La Scala puts on seventy or eighty performances a season: "To be general manager there would be a semi-retirement job"! The Met has a full-time orchestra and a full-time chorus, and "it's important that they work"—more or less continuously. In Vienna, "they're known for putting on a production with no rehearsal at all, or just one rehearsal. They're also known for having one leading cast member," with the rest plucked from the company. "We are, and have been historically, noted for having top singers." But, Volpe continues,

> as the season expands, this becomes more and more difficult, particularly considering travel. A lot depends on the dollar. Our fees are lower than in the European houses. In Italy, they'll pay $30,000 for a single performance. They'll deny it, but it's true. Our top fee is $15,000. So, what's going to happen is, some singers will spend more time in Europe than in the United States.

Volpe cites Bryn Terfel, the beloved bass-baritone from Wales:

> He has three children, and it's easy for him to jump on a plane and fly to a city in Europe, sing, and go home. To come to the Met is a large commitment. You end up here a long period of time. You can't fly home to be back with the family, as you can in Europe. The days of great singers staying in America are over.

Like everyone else, the Met has taken a financial hit in the post-9/11 environment. Ticket sales and donations are down. But the institution is fundamentally sound. As Volpe observes, a house that survived the Great Depression can survive a lot. You just have to roll with events, and not panic.

A particular concern in recent days has been whether the famous Met radio broadcasts will continue. They began in 1931, and in 1940 came under the sponsorship of Texaco. In 2003, that company—now ChevronTexaco—announced that it would quit sponsoring the broadcasts. This was no small matter to the Met, because, as Volpe points out, radio is responsible for a good deal of its national and international reputation. Three million people listen to the broadcasts in the United States, and seven million listen in forty-one other countries. "That's very important to the Met's image." It takes about $7 million a year to produce these radio broadcasts. At this writing, the Met has not secured permanent sponsorship, but Volpe and Beverly Sills—who is chairman of the Met's board—are confident that they will. There is little reason to doubt them.

About the prospect of making records again, it's hard to be as confident. The recording industry is now stagnant, as I

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have mentioned. Opera CDs coming out today, says Volpe, tend to be produced in Europe, "with orchestras that are paid a very small fee." Unionized orchestras in the U.S. would have none of that. "What's been happening in our country is that record companies have been saying for years and years and years, 'We can't afford to pay what the musicians demand, and we can't make any money off of classical music.' So business has dried up." And, "frankly, how many *Rosenkavalier*s do you need?" (Back to the glut problem.) Continues Volpe, "The only way the Met will get back into recording is if we produce recordings live, without paying fees, and then have some kind of revenue sharing with our people."

The general manager recounts a conversation with Renée Fleming, the celebrated soprano, who opened the 2003–04 Met season as Violetta. "Renée was unhappy because there was no television for her *Traviata*. I told her that we would broadcast on radio and that maybe, someday, there would be a recording of that." In truth, "that's the real McCoy," the live broadcast, with no touching up, no corrective takes, "and I don't think it's so horrible" to represent the company that way.

Volpe and the Met are often criticized for producing too few new operas—for being a mere "museum," if not a "mausoleum." The GM protests,

> If you look at the last ten years, our track record with contemporary works is probably as good as any opera company's. But understand something: Commissioned works are very, very expensive. We have to fund the commissioning and fund the production. If we can do one every three years, that would be a nice pace. What we can do depends on our financial situation.

Sure, in the good old days, the Met produced one new opera after another. But "do you know what?" asks Volpe. "Composers would come in off the street, shove a manuscript into your hand, and say, 'Here's an opera. Wanna put it on?' They didn't start with, 'First give me $350,000, then . . .' And remember, we rehearse what we perform: We don't put things onstage unrehearsed." Rehearsal, like time—being time—is money.

The Met seems permanent, unbudgeable, like the U.S. Capitol. Will it be forever? "I think it will be forever," says the GM,

> because there are so many people who love this art form. The question is, What does that mean? The Met in the form of today? Maybe not. Does it mean thirty-two weeks of performances a year? Maybe not. So the question is—I hate the word "evolve." When I first started out, I hated that word. I said, "Don't tell me about 'evolve.' You've got to be in charge and decide things, not just let them evolve!"

But Joe Volpe is more comfortable with that concept now, as one is often forced to become.

In the good old days, the Met produced one new opera after another. But "do you know what?" asks Volpe. "Composers would come in off the street, shove a manuscript into your hand, and say, 'Here's an opera. Wanna put it on?' They didn't start with, 'First give me $350,000, then . . .'"

A word about the audience—the concertgoers, the operagoers. From time immemorial, people have fretted over the "graying" of the audience, and the relative paucity of the young. This should not be high on any list of worries. As Sedgwick Clark puts it, "You come to appreciate music more when you're older. Also, you tend to have more time and money." Carnegie Hall's Harth says, "If you look at pic-

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tures taken during Toscanini's concerts, you will see that the audience is a sea of gray hair. I assume those attendees are now in another realm. But people still come for concerts conducted by Simon Rattle," and these tend also to be gray-headed.

Jack McAuliffe of the Orchestra League notes that the median age of an audience member—for an orchestral concert—is "somewhere in the mid-fifties." And "when you say that, most people think, 'Gee, the concert audience is over fifty-five' or so. But what it really means is that half the people are younger than that, and half are older—sometimes a lot older. What are we supposed to do? Kick people out when they're seventy or eighty? They keep coming." The quest—even lust—for younger people sometimes gets a little comic. They are, for many, a holy grail. Concert presenters want the young, the same as churches do. Experience has shown, however, that people take a while to come to both—that is, to music and to church.

But we should not be overly blithe. McAuliffe stresses a key difference between today and yesterday: "Most young people," now, "have grown up with absolutely no exposure to classical music. People knew something about music a generation or two ago. Even if they didn't want to, they learned something about it. Today, it's easy to avoid, and even if you want to learn about it, it's hard to get." In the past, orchestras were "the provider of the end product," and now they are "the introduction" to it. Orchestras, opera companies, and other institutions are doing what they can to fight musical ignorance, by providing pre-concert lectures, notes on the Internet, and the like.

Zarin Mehta says that it is not only lack of education that gives pause, but "lack of espousal by the media." The larger culture seems unwilling to embrace and instill classical music. Therefore, Mehta wonders whether the gray heads will keep coming, as they always have. Not a few critics maintain that younger people would be attracted by additional contemporary music, as opposed to the standard repertory. Programming is a rich subject, demanding an essay, or a book, unto itself. But suffice it to say that evidence for this claim—newer would attract younger—is thin on the ground. Nor does common sense support it. As Mehta says, "A certain group of young people may go to an avant-garde evening, if it is created in a certain way, but when you talk about a symphony orchestra playing new music, it is as difficult for a young person as it is for an older person." Really, "if someone has not been exposed to much music, do you give him a festival of Beethoven or a festival of Ligeti?"

Now to the death of the recital, or at least its diminishment. This is especially troubling in that a recital is, for many of us, an incomparably satisfying musical experience.

From time immemorial, people have fretted over the "graying" of the audience, and the relative paucity of the young.

Ignat Solzhenitsyn is a pianist and conductor (and son of the great man). Of recitals, he says, "They're going down the tubes. Apparently, they're too boring, they require too much concentration." And the explosion of chamber music has bitten badly into recitals, as presenting organizations "just view them as too risky, economically."

Of course, recitals still abound at Carnegie Hall. Indeed, Carnegie has opened a new hall within its complex—Zankel Hall—that will see a great many recitals. But Robert Harth does not necessarily expect a recital to sell out. He points to one of the best events—in his view, and mine—of the 2002–03 season, an all-unaccompanied recital courtesy of the great Russian violinist Maxim Vengerov. "Let me ask you something," says Harth:

> What's a successful concert? Carnegie Hall has 2,800 seats. For Vengerov, 2,000 were in at-

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> tendance. I said to my board, "Is it not a success because 800 seats were empty? Or is it a success because 2,000 were filled?" It's absolutely a success, if it's a great concert and those who were there had a wonderful time. It becomes an *unsuccessful* concert when, as an administrator, you budget to sell 2,500. But if you budget to sell 1,500 or 1,800, you'll be happy.

Harth knows that Carnegie Hall will lose money—virtually all classical-music organizations do. He just wants to lose it wisely and enrichingly (in the nonmonetary sense!).

Since 1994, Marilyn Horne has devoted a good bit of her time to the Marilyn Horne Foundation. I have frequently described this organization as a "point of light," to adapt the famous—or once famous—term used by the first President Bush. It is dedicated, in particular, to the perpetuation of the song recital. Is it really true, I ask the great mezzo, that there are fewer recitals now than there used to be? "Oh, my God yes, please. I started going to song recitals when I was a child, and I started singing them in about 1960. From that time on, I could count on doing twenty or thirty recitals a year, depending on my availability. Some years were heavy with concerts [with orchestra] and some years were heavy with opera, but there was no question that the [recital] opportunities were there." The number of "community concerts" has greatly decreased. And those series that remain "seldom take classical singers. They don't take them at all, unless the singer is a big star. So where is the younger singer going to get experience?"

Horne faults the "dumbing down of America" and the tendency to "play to the lowest common denominator." Television, computers, and other innovations play their distracting roles. Opera, the singer concedes, is doing much better than the vocal recital, which is odd, in a way, because recitals are infinitely cheaper to present. "But you have to have people in the seats," regardless of the cost of staging the event. "And opera is much more glamorous, of course," suited to our "very visual age. You can see this is in the way casting is done, and the fact that the stage director and the scene designer have much more power than they used to have. If you read an opera review, you see that seven-eighths of it are about the production." The music is almost an afterthought.

A special shame about the decline of the vocal recital is that there are so many today who do it well. In lieder alone, I might name Michael Schade, Christine Schäfer, Thomas Quasthoff, Marjana Lipovšek, and Thomas Hampson, and I have barely gotten started. I, of course, have heard them, in some cases repeatedly—but I frequent halls in New York and Salzburg. Marilyn Horne has sung in all fifty states—the last of which was Wyoming, where she performed just as her (classical) career was closing. (She now does pop evenings, and marvelously, too.) Whatever the cause for optimism in other areas, it seems clear that the flame of the song recital—and of the recital in general—needs serious tending, which Horne, of course, is laudably engaged in doing.

We now turn our attention to that "culprit," chamber music. America has progressed far beyond the Budapest String Quartet, the famed four who "vent by bus." There are dozens of string quartets, and other chamber ensembles, making a fine living. As Solzhenitsyn says, "Look at the numbers: The quantity of series and festivals devoted exclusively to chamber music is increasing every year." The Chamber Music Society of Philadelphia, for instance, started off with a handful of concerts, and "now they're doing seventy." Chamber music "has gone from precisely that—a private, intimate affair [in a chamber]—to a major staple of the concert stage."

The leading chamber-music institution in the country is the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Founded in 1969, it was a mere "niche-filler," to use Solzhenitsyn's term, but it rapidly grew, spawning many imitators. Its artistic director is David

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Shifrin, who on the side is one of the world's foremost clarinetists. He confirms that presenters find chamber music affordable and even profitable. "You can do it in someone's living room or you can do it in Avery Fisher Hall. Organizations that can't afford to pay stagehands or a high rent can present a chamber ensemble of the highest quality—they can do it in a high-school auditorium." If you have any funds at all, "you have a great shot at getting a world-class performance in great and compelling repertoire." But "as much as I enjoy playing chamber music, these concerts have sort of taken the place of recitals. I wish there were room for both." To be sure, presenters will still engage "the superstar pianists, but not that many violinists or cellists—to say nothing of clarinetists, flutists, or French horn players—have a shot at a recital." So the sonata repertoire, in particular, goes unheard. "Most presenters around the country go for star power, go for box office. If they can't have a famous name, they want more people onstage."

As for the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Shifrin believes that it will continue to flourish, if "with some bumps here and there," as in most any enterprise. And the festivals keep proliferating. "For a long time, there have been invitations to play really good music, with really good people, in wonderful places from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Now it's even wider. Next year I'm going back to a chamber-music festival in Tucson in March." For a quarter-century, Shifrin has been involved with Chamber Music Northwest, in Portland. That institution now operates year-round, not just in the summer. "They are able to do wonderful things there, in a city of about a million. Arguably the highest-quality cultural institution in Portland is that chamber-music festival."

A wag once said about chamber music, "It's like the cockroach: Try as you might, you'll never stamp it out." An unlovely comparison, perhaps, but clear.

In the field of education, the good news is at the top: Conservatories have rarely had it better. Endowments are full, and so are the practice rooms—full to overflowing, actually. Leading conservatories are the Curtis Institute, the Juilliard School, the Peabody Institute, and so on—names that have been renowned for decades. Newer on the block is the Colburn School in Los Angeles; the San Francisco Conservatory is still going strong farther north. Then there are the many music schools in universities, led, probably, by Indiana and Michigan. As Solzhenitsyn observes, there is "an obscene number" of music majors in the United States today—on the order of 100,000 a year. There are not plum jobs for all these aspirers, even if they were equal to them.

A house that survived the Great Depression can survive a lot. You just have to roll with events, and not panic.

But those who fall short of their highest goal may teach or otherwise stay close to music.

At Juilliard, applications increase by 10 percent annually. The school admits about 8 percent of those who apply. Joseph Polisi, the president of Juilliard, is adamant that his school provides a better education than it did, say, in 1930: For one thing, "we educate the entire human being, not just the artist." Students are presented with a liberal arts curriculum, and they study every aspect of music, not just their specialty. In addition, says Polisi, "we preach 'the artist as citizen,'" seeking to endow the student with "a sense of responsibility for making sure that the arts flourish in society."

People who tend to look for a dark lining say, "Well, yes, the better music schools are at a peak, but the students aren't American—they come from overseas, mostly from Asia." True, but, as Zarin Mehta says, "What do you mean by American?" Many of these kids become American in due course, along with the family members who surround them, just as people have done for genera-

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tions. Polisi reports that 70 percent of the pianists studying at Juilliard come from abroad. The foreign country supplying the most students overall is South Korea, followed by Canada, Taiwan, Communist China, Japan, and then the former Soviet republics. Marilyn Horne reports a similar pattern at the Music Academy of the West (Santa Barbara), where she is voice director. We have gone from a time when Americans went abroad to study music and become musicians, to a time when the world beats a path to the American door.

Joseph Polisi has no doubt about Juilliard's staying-power:

> I often get the Chicken Little question: Is the sky falling? Will music survive? Of course it will. I'm surrounded every day by about 800 absolutely motivated, talented, disciplined, energized young people. There's no way in the world they're going to be stopped in music, dance, and drama. They will create audiences, and they will be the leaders of the future. That's what I ask them to be. Yes, the audiences of the New York Philharmonic are grayer than for Pearl Jam [a rock group]. There has never been a large niche for classical music. But it will survive.

We have a glut problem, however. Horne recalls saying fully twenty-five years ago, "We should close all the conservatories for five years," just to give the job market a break. And "now the situation is worse!" For woodwind and brass players, life has always been tricky: Zarin Mehta tells me that, for a recent tuba opening in the Philharmonic, over 120 people applied. One result of all this redundant talent is that players tend to be quite good, everywhere. David Delta Gier, a conductor with wide experience both in America and abroad, says, "You should hear some of the players in Sioux Falls!" (The orchestra there is the South Dakota Symphony.) The sad part of our cornucopia is that many musicians wind up disappointed. Gier knows many fellow conductors—or would-be conductors—who have not had careers, or satisfying ones, simply because of the number of podiums available (versus all those who want to stand on them). "You get into a great school, you study with a great teacher, you work hard, you do everything right, and you think you ought to be rewarded. But a lot of people have been made to realize that that's not necessarily the case."

It would take a very hard-headed person to state the cold fact that no one asked anyone to pursue a career in music—or in film, or in journalism, or in anything else. But he would not be wrong.

The decline in music education from kindergarten through high school is a bit of a puzzle. Contrary to what many believe, America's public schools are awash in money. Never has per-pupil expenditure been higher. In some places, it is scandalously high (for what it produces). But music has been downgraded, meaning that it is almost surely a question of priority.

Most people of a certain age—people who love music—can remember with fondness particular music teachers. Marilyn Horne had two of them with whom she kept in touch till the end of their lives. In fact, when she was making a Christmas album (with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir), she remembered a carol from her schooldays, but could not locate the music. So she called the relevant teacher and asked her for it. "All she had was the melody, because we sang without any accompaniment—we only had a pitch pipe." Schools across the country rarely had elaborate facilities. Little Marilyn and her classmates—in Bradford, Pennsylvania—had what was called a "playroom," down in the basement. But there was a sense of caring about music, and the other arts, and nurturing them.

Obviously, there are pockets of excellence—of caring—in primary and secondary schools. As David Shifrin says, "I wouldn't count this country out." It is a big, continental nation, with thousands of school systems. But where music education does exist, it tends to be "aesthetic," according to Joseph Polisi, rather than "performance-

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based." In aesthetic education, "you just *talk* about the music. You don't play anything. You talk about a symphony or an opera or a piece of chamber music. That's easier to teach, because the teacher doesn't need to be an expert in the oboe, for example. The downside is, that kind of education doesn't stick, in my opinion." Performance-based education is far and away preferable. But we have apparently reached a point where any education at all is a welcome surprise.

As to the recording industry, it is certainly not true that no CDs are coming out—they are. Acres of them. But fewer are being made than in the past, particularly in the U.S. We could live off recordings already made pretty much forever, as almost all the known repertory has been recorded, often many times over. But that would be no fun. First, new music needs to be recorded—and it regularly is, despite the griping of composers and their advocates—and, second, it would be a shame not to capture musicians of today, or of the future, even in the most familiar repertory. Yes, we should have Renée Fleming's Violetta. And we should have Michael Schade's *Schöne Müllerin*, no matter how good Fritz Wunderlich's is.

I will share an anecdote that speaks to the nervous state of recording. It comes from Marilyn Horne, talking about Deborah Voigt, one of the most important sopranos now on the scene. Voigt was scheduled to appear in a gala for Horne's foundation. But she called Horne to say, "I would never do this to you, but I have a chance to record Wagner duets with Domingo, and it would be at the exact same time, and I feel I can't pass it up, because I simply don't get to record." Needless to say, Horne understood, and released her; the recording—a superlative one on EMI—was made.

Horne is incensed at one tactic of the record companies:

> They're marketing singers as opera singers who aren't opera singers! Andrea Bocelli, Charlotte Church . . . Whatever else they are—and a person may like them—they're not opera singers. I let out a yell the other day, because I was doing the crossword puzzle, as I do daily, and one clue was "Tune for Bocelli." It turned out to be "aria," and I went, "&*@!" I wish him well, and he has a place, but please don't call him an opera singer.

This would be especially misleading, according to Horne, to those who are new to operatic music or to classical music in general. I could argue that Bocelli and other such "soft" singers are good for music—partly as a starting point for the public, a kind of gateway—but Horne, whose musical standards are rigorous, has a point.

We should also understand that not all companies have flopped with classical CDs.

We have gone from a time when Americans went abroad to study music and become musicians, to a time when the world beats a path to the American door.

As Benjamin Ivry reported in *The Christian Science Monitor*, "independent" labels such as Naxos, Chandos, and Harmonia Mundi are more than getting by. "Naxos is thriving," said Klaus Heymann, that label's founder, "and other independents who make interesting recordings people want to buy are also doing well. . . . What has been killed, or rather committed suicide [!], are the big-budget, all-star productions which got so expensive that they could never recoup their investment." And Bernard Coutz, founder of Harmonia Mundi, remarked sensibly, "No one killed classical music, which makes up part of the patrimony of humanity." (In 1997, the critic Norman Lebrecht published an incendiary book called *Who Killed Classical Music?*) "Across 2,000 years of history, classical music, like painting or fine cuisine, has not necessarily attracted great crowds . . . but it has always interested people who by luck or talent have learned to love it." That is an attitude of maturity.

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A major issue for the first part of our century is, as Robert Harth puts it, "How do you legislate the use of music over the Internet? How do you not overpay, not underpay, not take advantage of musicians?" Harth expects that people will "get their musical fix" from the Internet the way they once did from the radio, and that is already occurring. A site called iClassics is offering "webcasts"—a new word that may become as familiar as "broadcasts"—meaning that people can watch and listen to concerts, over the Internet, for free. How, then, does a company make money? As a representative explained to me, the hope is that those watching and listening for free will come to like the performer, or the music, and thus attend a concert or buy a CD. All involved are still feeling their way around in the new era.

As I mentioned earlier, musicians are beginning to make CDs on their own—without benefit of the big labels—and peddling them themselves. David Shifrin observes that "technology is such that any musician who really wants to be heard, and recorded for posterity, can just go ahead and do it. It costs practically nothing to record and produce CDs, compared to what it used to cost with vinyl." As a result, "you have a proliferation of vanity recordings, plus small labels that have success." The cellist David Finkel makes big-time Deutsche Grammophon recordings with the string quartet of which he is part: the Emerson. But he and his wife—the pianist Wu Han—started www.ArtistLed.com, which they bill as "classical music's first Internet recording company." Other musicians have started similar enterprises. Shifrin notes that "recordings are much easier to find on some websites than they were when you actually had to find a record store, a physical, bricks-and-mortar store. This whole trend is in its infancy."

Here again, we "evolve," to use the word that Joe Volpe has learned to love.

You could be sour about the music industry, if you wanted to be. Classical radio stations are dying—even when you can make money in classical, you can make more in pop. But a person can buy Heifetz in the Brahms and Tchaikovsky concertos for seven bucks. And you can listen to the world's best classical stations via the Internet, wherever they are, and wherever you are. It was said, eons ago, that radio would kill concerts, and then that the LP—mass produced and marketed—would. But concerts kept growing in popularity. Sadly, few orchestras now broadcast nationally. But the musicians' union has a lot to answer for. It may have helped to make its members more prosperous, but it has been self-defeating in other ways. Orchestras don't broadcast nationally—or record much—because of rigid union rules and, if I may, dumb, fruitless greed.

Some lament that classical musicians are ignored today, kept off the tube and *Time* magazine's cover. The critic and scholar Stuart Isacoff informed me that, when Anton Rubinstein first came to this country, he was greeted with a torchlight parade. And yet this day has its celebrities, ones so big they are known by their first names alone: Itzhak and Yo-Yo; Luciano, Plácido, Renée, Bryn. Some critics shudder at the Three Tenors stadium concerts, those vulgar spectacles—yet these may be the same critics who complain that classical music has no connection to the broader public. It is merely human to want things on one's own terms.

Music-lovers are a terribly nostalgic lot, always going on about golden eras (long past, of course) and cluck-clucking over the present. But there are great and historic musicians in every age—we simply tend not to recognize them when they are before us. The present age, in my view, is a thrilling one for singing. I could give you a list—a long one. And, yes, Heifetz and Milstein are dead. But have you heard Hilary Hahn and Maxim Vengerov? Rostropovich is getting old, but have you heard Han-Na Chang? Rostropovich certainly has: The young lady—girl, really—was the first cellist with whom Slava ever recorded, as conductor.

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Eventually, these young musicians will teach, and create protégés. Hilary Hahn studied with Jascha Brodsky, who studied with Ysaÿe and Zimbalist. And so it goes.

Our musical institutions will survive because people insist that they do—not a vast number of people, as compared with those who love sports or soda, but enough people. As Sedgwick Clark says, "Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, and the rest will always be performed. Always. There's no doubt about it. And, incidentally, I have no problem viewing orchestras [for example] as museums." This is one of the great sneers: that our institutions have become museums. "They *are* museums, no less than the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Museum of Modern Art. And there's nothing wrong with that. That doesn't mean that the orchestras don't play contemporary music—they bring it into the museum, and whether it stays on exhibit remains to be seen." I hasten to add that a museum is not a mausoleum. There is great life—throbbing, comforting, provocative, glorious life—in those musical museums of ours.

It pays to remember, too, that people who have been around for a while tend not to sweat the future of classical music. "The pendulum swings back and forth," says Gary Graffman. Already he has lived "through two or three of these round-trip swings"! To obsess over the fate of classical music, notes Graffman, is like obsessing over the fate of the stock market: We should take the long view, and not get carried away by sharp spikes up or sharp spikes down. Echoing our chairman of the Federal Reserve, I might say that both irrational exuberance and irrational gloom are errors to be avoided. And do not, as Gary Graffman says, make the mistake of thinking that "the audience is limitless." Always there will be classical-music fannies in the seats—just don't create a ridiculous excess of them (seats, that is).

And allow me a final repetition: Our institutions will not prosper by themselves. One has to work at them. One has to tend the gardens of music, and they will indeed grow, or if not grow, at least not die, blooming again every year, to one degree or another. America is lucky in its plenitude of gardeners, and the gardens they make. Amidst all the handwringing—some of it justifiable—we should pause, in gratitude, to fold those hands as well.

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How good was Maugham?

by Anthony Daniels

In *The Summing Up*, published in 1938 when he was sixty-four years old, Somerset Maugham inveighed against literary obscurity and extolled the virtue of clarity (his own peculiar forte). His sentiments were unlikely to endear him to many of the literati of the twentieth century, whose subtlety and complexity, some of them imagined, precluded clodhopping clarity. Maugham explained the source of the obscurity with which they wrote:

> The author wraps his meaning in mystery so that the vulgar shall not participate in it. His soul is a secret garden into which the elect may penetrate only after overcoming a number of perilous obstacles.

This is very well said, and if its import were taken seriously half of contemporary literary fiction would never have been published and two-thirds of the teachers of the humanities would find themselves out of a job.

Nevertheless, there is in Maugham's astringent view the suspicion of a potential for a philistine's charter. Maugham himself could hardly be accused of philistinism: he was a discriminating collector of modern art, for example recognizing the genius of Gauguin before it was common knowledge, and he both loved and was knowledgeable about oriental art well before the taste for it became general. It is unlikely that many of the people who were condescending about him were able and willing, as he was, to read Racine in French, Calderón in Spanish, Dante in Italian, Goethe in German, and Chekhov in Russian (to say nothing of his formidable erudition in English literature). And yet one can easily imagine all the militant middlebrows of the world cheering loudly as they read *The Summing Up*. See, we were right all along to prefer light to heavy reading.

It is the suspicion of an underlying philistinism and shallowness that has dogged Maugham's literary reputation from the start. As Jeffery Meyers's new biography of Maugham makes clear,[1] he had a very interesting and varied life, far more interesting than that of most writers. His knowledge of the world was incomparable; his training as a doctor taught him about the minutiae of human suffering, while his spell as a British spy in Petrograd charged with aborting the Bolshevik revolution taught him about politics at the very highest level of world significance. He travelled extensively, fearlessly, and productively. It seems to me likely that his name will live largely because of the short stories that he wrote about the South Seas and the East Indies, which are among the best in the English language, or indeed in any language.

Meyers's biography is well written, entertaining, and of commendable brevity,

1 *Somerset Maugham*, by Jeffrey Meyers; Knopf, 432 pages, $30.

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compared with the two previous full biographies of The Master. I should recommend it to anyone who wanted to read about his life. There is just the right amount of psychology in it, and most of the interpretations are plausible and measured. Whether it adds much to our overall picture or appreciation of its subject, however, may be doubted. It enumerates Maugham's many homosexual liaisons much more fully than other biographies, and if this is the kind of thing you want to know, then it is to Meyers that you must now turn. Personally I could have done without the anecdote concerning Maugham's fecal incontinence when he was ninety-one years old and senile, for it is a matter of human decency and good manners to draw a veil over such frailty, unless there is some very good reason not to. Our exercise of the right to know ought sometimes to be tempered by a willingness to look away.

Maugham's personality, or persona, did little to aid his popularity among the intelligentsia. He was perceived as being stiff, formal, acidulous, snobbish, unsympathetic, sour, cynical, and misanthropic, though no one ever turned down the sumptuous hospitality offered at the Villa Mauresque on that account. This disparaging view of Maugham's character is very superficial and unimaginative, but it is the one that has prevailed.

There were five influences that conspired to make Maugham the character he was, and Meyers paints a convincing picture of the development of his complex personality. The first influence was the early death of his parents while they were living in Paris, and his subsequent removal to England under the guardianship of a parsimonious, mean-spirited and bigoted clerical uncle. Meyers aptly quotes Kipling to the effect that "when young lips have drunk deep of the bitter waters of Hate, Suspicion, and Despair, all the Love in the world will not wholly take away that knowledge." One might add that not all the pleasures of the world—and Maugham had tasted plenty of them by the time he died—can overcome completely the melancholy of an unhappy childhood. For him who has experienced misery early in life, there is a worm in the bud of all subsequent happiness. For such a person, life is suffering, and the most that can be hoped for is temporary distraction and relief until suffering returns.

Second, it ought to be remembered that Maugham spent the first twenty-seven years of his life under the reign of Queen Victoria, and the next nine under that of Edward VII, when it was believed that vice and emotion were things that gentlemen should not exhibit in public. It was natural, therefore, for an aspiring gentlemen to have at least two faces, the public and the private.

Third, Maugham suffered all his life from a pronounced stutter that rendered him self-conscious, especially early in life, and meant that he could never take ease of social intercourse for granted. Because of it, he always felt himself to be something of an outsider, struggling against a handicap. Self-assurance in his case always had an element of conscious bravado.

Fourth, he underwent medical training as a young man, a training that he thought was excellent for a writer. (Several times, young doctors in my hospital who aspire to write have sought my advice about what they should do, and I have always advised them to stay in medical practice for a few more years, until all the depths and shallows of the human heart are familiar to them, advice that they have never taken.) Meyers does not, in my opinion, emphasize Maugham's medical training enough. In order to be able to continue to practice, doctors have quickly to learn a kind of detached involvement in the lives of their patients. They must empathize and sympathize with them, but not to the point that they are overwhelmed emotionally by their sorrows. A doctor who fails to discipline his emotions is unlikely to be of much use to his patients; therefore the learning of such discipline, until it becomes second nature, is as much a part of medical training as pathology and therapeutics. It might appall

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sentimentalists to know that nothing I have seen in thirty years as a doctor, from epidemic and civil war to accident, murder and suicide, has ever caused me a moment's sleeplessness, and that a man could cut his throat in front of me without it affecting my appetite for dinner in the slightest. This, however, is not mere callousness or lack of feeling, it is necessary clinical detachment, and Maugham's writing bears the mark of a doctor's sensibility (as does Chekhov's). Though Maugham never practiced after qualification, his eye was clearly that of a doctor.

Last but not least was Maugham's homosexuality (or, strictly speaking, his bisexuality). On two occasions Meyers calls Maugham repressed, but Maugham would have disliked this word as applied to him, not because of any derogatory connotations it might bear, but because of its inexactitude. On Meyers's own evidence (whose accuracy I am not in a position to test), Maugham was far from repressed: he had an active sexual life until he was in his late eighties, he had many lovers, sailors were procured for him from the ports of the Mediterranean coast of France and brought to the Villa Mauresque, and there was no shortage of catamites during his oriental voyages. What Meyers means is that Maugham had to conduct his sexual life in private, with circumspection, since it was fame and social acceptance rather than notoriety that he desired, and it is an interesting reflection on our times that what is not done in full public view or knowledge should now be regarded as repressed. If Maugham had been able freely to parade himself with his American lover, Gerald Haxton, in Paddington (the homosexual quarter of Sydney), or in Castro Street in San Francisco, he would have been liberated rather than repressed: but I doubt that anyone would have wanted much to read what he wrote.

His deep disbelief in the possibility of lasting human happiness, his feeling of being an outsider even after he had achieved world fame, his emotional discipline that he learned as a doctor, his need for personal concealment, his high intelligence and passionate temperament combined to form a character that, despite his politesse and charm, many found disagreeable or even repellent, but which nevertheless gave him an uncanny ability to understand and sympathize with the hidden passions of the heart.

Maugham was not a snob. It is true that he had a weakness for the rich and famous (a weakness that was fully reciprocated), that royalty and former royalty were often his guests, and that he probably had a wider literary acquaintance than any man before or since. No man could be called famous until he had met Maugham. Punctilious in his manners, and demanding such punctiliousness in others, Maugham preferred people who could talk intelligently at his table and play bridge well. But nobody can be counted a snob merely because his acquaintance does not reflect the demographic make-up of the world population. This surely would be to take the concept of positive discrimination further than even its wildest and most fanatical proponents would as yet advocate. Maugham's first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, was drawn from his experiences as a student at St. Thomas's Hospital in London, and it treats the working class with great, though clear-eyed, sympathy. Maugham later derided the snobbery of the social milieu in which he grew up in one of his best novels, *Cakes and Ale*. The vicious pettiness of social distinctions based solely upon accident of birth could hardly have been more eloquently condemned. And though a man of considerable intellectual width and accomplishment himself, as familiar with the arguments of Spinoza as with the poetry of Schiller, he did not attribute transcendental or cosmic importance to his own taste for intellectual and literary pursuits. At the beginning of his short story "The Book Bag," he wrote:

> Some people read for instruction, which is praiseworthy, and some for pleasure, which is innocent, but not a few read from habit,

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> and I suppose that this is neither innocent nor praiseworthy. Of that lamentable company am I. From the standpoint of what eternity is it better to have read a thousand books than to have ploughed a million furrows?

Maugham did not despise the ordinary man, therefore, even if he did not choose him for his social circle, which is another thing entirely; and he soon learnt that many a dull exterior hid an extraordinary inner life. He was fond of quoting one of his anatomy teachers at St. Thomas's who, when helping Maugham to find a nerve in the corpse he was dissecting, told him that the normal was the rarest thing in the world, which is why Maugham's anatomy textbook had so misled him.

Yet the accusation is still made against Maugham that his characters are drawn only externally, that they have no subtly shifting inner life as, say, those of Virginia Woolf do, in whom emotion is like the shadow of a cloud passing over a field on a sunny day. He is therefore superficial, a behaviorist among writers, a kind of B. F. Skinner of literature. In his beautiful book of prose sketches about China, *On a Chinese Screen*, published in 1922, Maugham describes in a piece entitled "The Rolling Stone" an Englishman who had spent three years wandering through the remote parts of China on foot, by cart, and on the river, living more or less as a Chinese:

> When I met him I sought to discern how the variety of his experience had affected him; but though he was full of anecdote, a jovial, friendly creature, willing to talk at length of all he had seen, I could not discover that any of his adventures had intimately touched him. The civilised world irked him and he had a passion to get away from the beaten trail. The oddities of life amused him. He had an insatiable curiosity. But I think his experiences were merely of the body and were never translated into experiences of the soul. Perhaps that is why at bottom you felt he was commonplace. The insignificance of his mien was a true index to the insignificance of his soul. Behind the blank wall was blankness.

In essence, this is precisely the charge against Maugham himself, that he was a mere observer of externals without much in the way of a soul. He observed men much as lepidopterists collect butterflies, and pinned them to his page as the lepidopterist pins butterflies to his board. And certainly, I have met people like Maugham's Rolling Stone who have travelled many years in remote places who appear to have gained even less from their experiences than his Rolling Stone, for example young men from Europe and Australia who spent many years exploring the tributaries of the Congo, often in discomfort and possibly in danger, but whose vacancy of mind, incapable even of a proper anecdote, recalled that of men who have devoted themselves to smoking cannabis. According to his critics, Maugham was but one step up from them.

Maugham was aware of how disconcerting his apparent detachment might be to others. In *The Narrow Corner*, a novel published in 1932 that Meyers says is underrated, one of the characters, an English doctor called Saunders who is no longer allowed to practice in England and has lived many years in China, has so many traits of Maugham himself that it might be taken as a self-portrait:

> Dr. Saunders took an interest in his fellows that was not quite scientific and not quite human. He wanted to receive entertainment from them. He regarded them dispassionately and it gave him just the same amusement to unravel the intricacies of the individual as a mathematician might find in the solution of a problem. He had fewer prejudices than most men. The sense of disapproval was left out of him. . . . It is seldom that a man is shocked by the thought that someone has seduced another's wife. but it is hard for him to make a bosom friend of one who drops his aitches and almost impossible if he scoops up gravy

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> with his knife. Right and wrong were no more to him than good weather and bad weather. He took them as they came. He judged but he did not condemn. He laughed.
>
> He was very easy to get on with. He was much liked. But he had no friends. He was an agreeable companion, but neither sought intimacy nor gave it. It could not be denied that he led a good life . . . for he was charitable and kindly . . . but if motive counts for righteousness, then he deserved no praise; for he was influenced in his actions neither by love, pity nor charity.

Dr. Saunders's feeling for social convention as being more important than, say, the categorical imperative, and therefore a dropped aitch being a far worse solecism than a bank robbery is reflected in Maugham's thinking as far back as 1892, when he was only eighteen years old. In *A Writer's Notebook* there is the following entry for that year:

> No action is good or bad, but only such according to convention.

The preceding entry, however, recognizes the stultifying effect that convention may exert:

> Respectability is the cloak under which fools cover their stupidity.

Maugham's life and work may be interpreted as a constant battle in which the desire for freedom and license on the one hand and that for social respectability and observance of social convention on the other fought for supremacy and achieved an unstable equilibrium.

I think Maugham's intellectual ideal was the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, a man so equable that he was known as "le bon David," and whose prose Maugham fulsomely praised. Practically every sentence Hume ever wrote is shot through with irony, and it was to such urbane but Olympian irony that Maugham aspired, despite a temperament completely unsuited to it. This is evident from, for example, the opening paragraph of *Cakes and Ale*:

> I have noticed that when someone asks for you on the telephone and, finding you out, leaves a message begging you to call him up the moment you come in, and it's important, the matter is more often important to him than to you.

Of course Maugham is not so naïve as to be offended by this, for he is a man of the world, who does not expect more of his fellow-beings than they can give. He continues in ironic tone:

> When it comes to making you a present or doing you a favor most people are able to hold their impatience within reasonable bounds.

Unfortunately for Maugham, but fortunately perhaps for the reading public, he was not naturally of equable temperament but, on the contrary, hot-blooded and passionate; it required great self-control on his part to play the role of an urbane and unruffled man of the Enlightenment. From Hume he had learnt that reason was the slave of the passions, but people vary enormously in their natural emotional temperature, and in any case passion can surprise even the most phlegmatic. Maugham's alter ego in *The Narrow Corner*, Dr. Saunders, is on board a small and rickety sailing vessel in a storm in the East Indies when a storm blows up. Dr. Saunders is terrified.

> It seemed to him that it was only by an effort of will that he did not curl up in a corner and whimper. He had an instinct to appeal for succour to a God he did not believe in, and he had to clench his teeth to prevent his trembling lips from uttering a prayer. He had faced death before. He knew that he had no great attachment to life. . . . No, it was not that, it was just some instinct over which he had no control; and he looked curiously, as though it were something outside himself, at the terror that made his throat dry and his knees shake.

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I think Maugham's emotions terrified him. Much later in the novel, Dr. Saunders explains his philosophy to another of the characters, in terms that are reminiscent of the other philosopher whom Maugham praises for his English prose style, Berkeley (nodding also in the direction of Calderón's *La vida es sueño*, "Life Is but a Dream"). Asked what he believes, Dr. Saunders replies:

> "Do you really want to know? I believe in nothing but myself and my experience. The world consist of me and my thoughts and my feelings; and everything else is mere fancy. Life is a dream in which I create the objects that come before me. Everything knowable, every object of experience, is an idea in my mind, and without my mind it does not exist. There is no possibility and no necessity to postulate anything out-side myself. Dream and reality are one . . . and when I cease to dream, the world . . . will cease to be."

But Dr. Saunders is a skilled opthalmologist, just as Maugham is a popular writer with an immense income: and his idealism, while communicating an aura of pessimism and cosmic futility, actually changes nothing in his conduct. It is a defense mechanism. As Maugham himself once said, it is temperaments that choose philosophies, rather than philosophies that determine temperaments.

In fact, Maugham was not detached but, because he himself had known suffering so early in life, felt the suffering of others very deeply, so deeply that he feared his sensitivity might overwhelm him and cause him to break down altogether (or even worse, sink into sentimentality). Here Maugham describes the Chinese laborers whom he observed:

> The coolies take off their coats and walk stripped to the waist. Then sometimes in a man resting for an instant, his load on the ground but the pole still on his shoulders so that he has to rest slightly crouched, you see the poor tired heart beating against the ribs. Then also you see the coolies' backs. The pressure of the pole for long years, day after day, has made hard red scars, and sometimes there are open sores, great sores without bandages or dressing that rub against the wood; but the strangest thing of all is that sometimes, as though nature sought to adapt man for these cruel uses to which he is put, an odd malformation seems to have arisen so that there is a sort of hump, against which the pole rests. You see old men without an ounce of fat on their bodies, their skin loose on their bones . . . with hair thin and grey; and they totter under their burdens to the edge of the grave in which at last they shall have rest.

Is this unfeeling, or cynical? By describing externals so faithfully, Maugham helps us to imagine the coolies' burdens and what a lifetime of such work must mean. But he is quick to disclaim any moral superiority on account of his sensitivity:

> Their effort oppresses you. You are filled with a useless compassion.

Control your emotion before it gets the better of you—not a message much in tune with the temper of our times.

Appearance and reality were forever at war in Maugham. He was both respectable and bohemian; he was ironically detached from humanity and passionately involved in it; he was a social snob and an intellectual democrat; he craved emotional independence and unconditional love (which he never received). In the little communities of colonial expatriates of the South Seas and East Indies he found his perfect subject matter. Here were people torn between duty and inclination, monogamy and the promptings of instinct, convention and freedom. On the whole, they were very ordinary, neither cultured nor clever, but average specimens of their class and upbringing: but, as Maugham said, he would rather talk to a dentist than to a Prime Minister (at least from the point of view of gathering material for stories, life at the Villa Mauresque being another thing entirely).

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Maugham's instinct to trawl the South Seas and the East Indies for material was sound, and almost scientific in its precision. The science of bacteriology was still young when Maugham was a student, but he would have known what a pure culture was, that is to say, a culture of one bacterium separated from all others and incubated by itself. Well, the expatriates of the South Seas and East Indies must have seemed to him a pure culture of human nature and heightened emotion, seething under a thin, or strong but very brittle, veneer of convention and civilization. By virtue of his personality, opinions and conflicting desires, no one was better able to understand this than he. Precisely because the societies in which his characters moved were so tiny, passions ran high: love, jealousy, infatuation, pride, possessiveness, hatred, envy, sense of duty and position were magnified to murderous proportions, and anyone who has lived in such a society (as I have) knows that Maugham did not exaggerate. Close and unavoidable proximity with a small group of people to the exclusion of all others allows—no, almost inevitably results in—the emergence of emotions that one would hardly have credited oneself capable of. I am not given to deep hatred of individuals, but once, stuck in a small community of expatriates in Africa, I conceived an obsessive hatred for a sadistic nurse, who seemed to me then to be the embodiment of evil. My hatred was disproportionate, and I inflated the scale of her malevolence, but I did not see it until I had departed that tiny microcosm.

As to the accusation that Maugham saw only externals, that he did not indulge in the infinitely shifting qualifications, subtleties, and equivocations of Henry James (say), I think it is unimaginative, literal-minded and, curiously enough, insensitive. The inner turmoil of his characters is implicit in their behavior: more information about their states of mind would therefore decrease rather than increase the impact of the stories. Maugham is not a behaviorist who believes that subjective states are a black box whose contents are unknowable and therefore of no use or interest; he believes that man is an inference-drawing creature, and that to imagine a state of mind that leads someone to commit an extreme and uncharacteristic act has a greater effect than to be told it explicitly. I think he is right.

Another criticism of Maugham sometimes offered is that his stories are too well-made, with suspiciously neat endings. Life, by contrast, is not well-made. In that sense, then, he is not a realist, even if he is a naturalist, because in reality there are no stories. He is not avant but arrière garde, a literary reactionary, though no one who uses the term "avant garde" as a term of praise in relation to art ever quite explains what the final goal of art is: victory, perhaps, but over what exactly? A liking for stories?

I think Maugham would offer a pretty robust and uncompromising defense of his methods. First, he would say that stories are inherently satisfying to the human mind, and there is no earthly reason why writers should not offer this satisfaction to their readers; but second it is in any case the function of the human intellect to impose order on, or extract meaning from, the chaos of experience to which we are all subjected. The story is always made as much by what is left out as by what is included (as anyone who has ever heard an over-inclusive anecdotalist will attest). The storyteller is both a sculptor who fashions something from a block of experience, and a scientist who finds a generalization in a mass of data. It takes skill and intellect to do these things, and Maugham had both.

Despite his apparent disdain for some of his detractors, he was very concerned about his literary standing. He put himself at the top of the second division, but he nevertheless thought that he was unfairly disregarded by the literary establishment. Meyers thinks this was a sign of paranoia: was he not the most famous, highest paid author in the world, to whom every impor-

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tant writer, more or less, paid court? Did not Orwell say that the contemporary writer he most admired was Maugham, and do encomia come any more flattering than that? But Maugham, not his biographer, was right, as evidence in this biography suggests. Festschrifts were organized for his seventieth and then his eightieth birthdays, as they were for many lesser figures, but the vast majority of literary contributors wrote nothing for them, as if to be associated in any way with The Master was to sully their reputations, or to slum it. No festschrifts for him were ever published, therefore. Maugham knew what others thought of him, and was bitter about it.

Was he a great writer? I don't think the question is important, though it is always raised in his case. But we should value him for what he wrote, not for what others wrote, or for what he didn't write, or for what he should have written if he had been more "advanced." Suffice it to say that I think he will still be read in a hundred years, if anyone reads at all, that is. Perhaps his firm and extremely forceful views on English prose, while a pleasure themselves to read, have harmed his reputation, for he has been taken to imply that everyone should write like him, which is clearly absurd. I certainly wouldn't want every writer to write like him, any more than I would like every writer to write like Sir Thomas Browne, or indeed like anyone else. To read too much of him at a sitting makes one aware of a certain flatness or insipidity in his prose, which at first had seemed bracingly direct and unadorned, as well as urbane.

Mr. Meyers can't quite make his mind up about Maugham. He accepts that he wrote masterpieces, but considers him a much lesser writer than almost all the other giants of his era. I for my part couldn't help recalling, as I read this excellent biography, the writer Trigorin's imagined epitaph in *The Seagull*: Here lies Trigorin. He was a good writer, but not as good as Turgenev.

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Remembering George Gissing

by Judy Stove

George Orwell, who was born in 1903, the year of George Gissing's death, noted that most of Gissing's works were already, by the 1940s, out of print and virtually unobtainable. He admired Gissing's writing greatly. Orwell had read only a few of the novels, but "merely on the strength of *New Grub Street*, *Demos*, and *The Odd Women* I am ready to maintain that England has produced very few better novelists."

Yet George Gissing (1857–1903) is unknown to many, perhaps most, of the reading public. Many people have read at least one Thomas Hardy novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), for the simple reason that it was on some high-school English reading lists in the 1970s. (I strongly doubt that it is still on the school list, but that's another story.) Yet students are very unlikely to have read any novel of Hardy's younger contemporary Gissing, which is a pity, because in many ways Gissing was the better novelist. Hardy's great gift was his incomparable description of inanimate things: but his human characters, unlike his trees, fields, and stone walls, are often dull and unconvincing. Gissing was a skilful perceiver of nature as well, and moreover created characters who live forever in one's mind. As a novelist, Gissing was not far behind Zola and Turgenev.

Some university English departments retain an interest in Gissing. Occasionally I meet someone who studied *The Odd Women* (1893) as part of a feminist course in nineteenth-century literature. A Gissing Society has existed for many years, and there are several Gissing websites and on-line texts. Many Gissing scholars seem to be from the non-English-speaking world. (It is perhaps entirely predictable that as English courses in the West give way to film and "cultural studies," a dedicated Japanese scholar has been posting Gissing texts on-line.) Throughout the twentieth century, Gissing had a few devoted adherents: the English critic Gillian Tindall and the French scholar Pierre Coustillas both did much to keep his memory current.

Gissing did, in his own lifetime, achieve fame and some comfortable earnings. His work was regularly featured in literary magazines of the 1880s and 1890s. Some critics named him in the 1890s as one, with George Meredith and Hardy, of England's three leading novelists. In 1892, Gissing recorded (with some irony) in his diary an item from the gossip column of *The Bookman*: "Mr. Hardy is known especially to admire the writings of George Gissing." His friend the critic Morley Roberts (now himself quite forgotten, but influential in the 1890s) championed Gissing's works, as did H. G. Wells and Meredith.

So why has Gissing been forgotten? He was male, so that although he wrote a great deal about the role of women, he hasn't survived in the politically correct academy even the way that the Brontës or George Eliot have survived. (Though who now

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reads George Eliot? Certainly not, it would appear, the people who recently made the television series based on *Daniel Deronda*).

And while Gissing's books certainly deal with the problems caused by poverty, he was suspicious of recipes for reform. Gissing felt that it was profoundly wrong that the lower classes had such hard and squalid lives, and he had a deep sympathy for those who found society against them, but he was equally convinced (as he wrote in his diary in 1888) that "the idealistic social reformer is of far less use than the humble discharger of human duty."

Gissing wrote a lot about the difficulties of being an artist in an increasingly commercial age. *New Grub Street* (1891) is an unforgettable account of a novelist struggling to write when inspiration fails (Orwell found this "the most impressive" of Gissing's novels, "also an upsetting and demoralizing book"). But because he found no simple solutions, he has not been adopted by the intelligentsia in the way that a less profound writer such as Oscar Wilde has been. (No doubt the appeal of Wilde is on other grounds as well.)

So far from winning friends, in fact, Gissing's writing has a way of annoying even his fans. What irritated Orwell in the 1940s, and the vaguely left-wing Tindall in the 1970s, was that Gissing was drawn to the exclusive, the old-fashioned, the scholarly, and the privileged.

The reasons for this lie in Gissing's youth; he was temperamentally a student of literature who was thrown into a particularly chaotic life. His lower-middle-class upbringing in Wakefield, a manufacturing town in northern England, was always a source of chagrin to him: his attitude is best shown, at painful length, in the novel *Born in Exile* (1892). (It is a loss to criticism that Orwell was unable to obtain a copy of this, in some ways Gissing's greatest, novel.) Its hero is Godwin Peak, a young man whose father, a radical chemist, named his son after William Godwin, the author of his favorite work, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). Like Gissing himself, Godwin is relatively poor, but, because of his academic success, finds himself able to associate with aristocratic boys and their families. Until, that is, his uncle plans to open a tea-room opposite the school, proudly titled "Peak's Dining and Refreshment Rooms." Godwin instantly resolves to leave school rather than endure the disgrace.

After several years, though, Godwin finds himself in a position to re-enter polite society, through taking holy orders. Although he does not believe in religion, he sees a church career as his only way of associating with educated and agreeable people, particularly of meeting a woman he might marry. Here Godwin, in a London crowd, sees a carriage bearing two ladies:

> Here [Godwin] stood, one of the multitude, of the herd; shoulder to shoulder with boors and pickpockets; and within reach of his hand reposed those two ladies, in Olympian calm, seeming unaware even of the existence of the throng. . . .
>
> They were his equals, those ladies; merely his equals. With such as they he should by right of nature associate.
>
> In his rebellion, he could not hate them. He hated the malodorous rabble who stared insolently at them and who envied their immeasurable remoteness. Of mere wealth he thought not; might he only be recognized by the gentle of birth and breeding for what he really was, and be rescued from the promiscuity of the vulgar!

Gissing cannot, however, resist satirizing the superficiality of the established church, particularly its Protean ability to take on new and bizarre forms in response to intellectual fashions. Godwin's schoolfellow Bruno Chilvers exemplifies the new style of clergyman, announcing,

> "The results of science are the divine message to our age; to neglect them, to fear them, is to remain under the old law while the new is demanding our adherence, to repeat the Jewish error of bygone time. Less of St. Paul,

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> and more of Darwin! Less of Luther, and more of Herbert Spencer!"

Pace Orwell, Gissing did not lack a sense of humor, but it was a very bitter one.

It is only a matter of time before the Warricombes, the aristocratic family into which Godwin has insinuated himself under cover of the cloth, discover his deceit. Godwin's hunger for living in beautiful surroundings, with well-stocked libraries, reveals a great deal about Gissing.

Another aspect of this deep desire for the old and the exclusive was Gissing's lifelong love of classical literature. In *New Grub Street*, Edwin Reardon, the struggling novelist, and his friend Harold Biffen (who struggles even more, just to find daily bread), revive their spirits by swapping lines of Sophocles.

> "Now, I want to know how you scan this chorus in the 'Oedipus Rex.'"
>
> Reardon took the volume, considered, and began to read aloud with metric emphasis.
>
> "Choriambics, eh?" cried the other. "Possible, of course; but treat them as Ionics a minore with an anacrusis, and see if they don't go better."
>
> For half an hour the two men talked Greek metres as if they lived in a world where the only hunger known could be satisfied by grand or sweet cadences.

Even as they both know it to be impossible, they plan—as they have always planned—their trip to Greece and Italy together. The most exclusive and the most unattainable world is that of the past, and Gissing's nostalgia was for the ancient world, for the wine and olives and grass fragrant in the sun, as far as possible from the cold, squalor, smoke, and filth of urban England. Tindall noted that Gissing had what she called "exaggerated respect" for the classics, but to make light of what was, in fact, Gissing's passion, is to miss one of the most important sides of his personality.

Gissing did make the trip to the Mediterranean, which he described in *By the Ionian Sea* (1901), understandably one of the happiest of his books. "Every man has his intellectual desire," he writes in his first chapter;

> mine is to escape life as I know it and dream myself into that old world which was the imaginative delight of my boyhood. The names of Greece and Italy draw me as no others; they make me young again, and restore the keen impressions of that time when every new page of Greek or Latin was a new perception of things beautiful. The world of the Greeks and Romans is my land of romance; a quotation in either language thrills me strangely; and there are passages of Greek and Latin verse which I cannot read without a dimming of the eyes, which I cannot repeat aloud because my voice fails me.

For a progressive such as Orwell, such overt preference for the past was culpable. Orwell wrote, patronizingly (all quotes are from his 1948 article):

> Gissing would have liked a little more money for himself and some others, but he was not much interested in what we should now call social justice.
>
> [Gissing] is only acquainted with a few strata of society, and . . . does not seem to have much grasp of political or economic forces.
>
> Like most English writers subsequent to the mid-nineteenth century, Gissing could not imagine any desirable destiny other than being a writer or a gentleman of leisure.
>
> [Gissing] did not see that [the working classes] were capable of becoming civilized if given slightly better opportunities.

None of these comments is fair. A vital theme of many of Gissing's novels is "opportunity" for the working class. The fact that "opportunities" do not always have desirable results perhaps shows that Gissing was more honest about them than Orwell.

Furthermore, *Demos* (1886) (one of the few Gissing novels which Orwell had read), is a book—subtitled "A Story of English

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Socialism"—entirely about politics, human nature, and the corruption exerted by power. Many writers, most comprehensively Mark Connelly in *Orwell and Gissing* (1997), have noted parallels between the novels of the two Georges. It is clear that Gissing's work had a strong influence on Orwell's novels, and that the writers, despite differing political views, shared conservative and pessimistic feelings about life, women, and the destruction of the countryside. If Gissing was a reactionary, so, about many things, was Orwell.

While it is clear that Gissing was emotionally a bourgeois, as Tindall might have put it, it could never be argued that he was unacquainted with the low life of which he wrote. Anyone who knows anything about him knows that Gissing's own reason for leaving school was far more sensational than Godwin Peak's. In 1876, then a brilliant nineteen-year-old student at Owen's College in Manchester, expected to proceed to university, Gissing had begun a relationship with a seamstress called Helen (Nell) Harrison, often described as a prostitute, but more probably Gissing's Mimi (Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* (1848) remained one of his favorite books). To obtain money to help support her, Gissing stole from other students. He was caught, stripped of his prizes and student status, and sentenced to jail. He served his sentence, then traveled to America, where he taught for a while and tried to live by writing. He came close to starvation. He returned to England in 1877, sought out Nell, and married her in 1879.

The marriage was disastrous. A succession of separations and reunions ended in a final parting, in the mid-1880s. Nell may have been drinking heavily for some years, and died in 1888, apparently from the effects of alcohol and syphilis. On seeing her corpse, Gissing was moved to write:

> In nothing am I to blame; I did my utmost; again and again I had her back to me. Fate was too strong. But as I stood beside that bed, I felt that my life henceforth had a firmer purpose. Henceforth I never cease to bear testimony against the accursed social order that brings about things of this kind. I feel that she will help me more in her death than she balked me during her life. Poor, poor thing!

The "she will help me more" phrase is curious, but for Gissing, life was material for his art: there was a streak of coldbloodedness in his personality. And while he wrote of "the accursed social order," as we have seen, he remained basically conservative.

After Nell's death, Gissing's friends were appalled when he became engaged to Edith Underwood, another woman manifestly unsuited to life with an intellectual. He himself recognized this, noting bleakly in his diary in April 1891: "Wrote to Mrs Harrison, telling her of my marriage, and that henceforth I am shut off from educated people." Two years later, Gissing wrote:

> On way home, at night, an anguish of suffering in the thought that I can never hope to have an intellectual companion at home. Condemned for ever to associate with inferiors—and so crassly unintelligent. Never a word exchanged on anything but the paltry everyday life of the household. Never a word to me, from anyone, of understanding sympathy—or of encouragement. Few men, I am sure, have led so bitter a life.

Edith was depressive, antisocial, and, as it later turned out, mentally unstable. Two sons were born, to whom Gissing was devoted (the tender account of little Hughie's toddlerhood in *The Whirlpool* [1897] bespeaks Gissing's patience and keen observation as a father). His diary reveals that he took a good deal of care of the older boy, Walter, as a baby and toddler, before—convinced that his unhappy marriage meant that their home was no home to the boy—entrusting him to his unmarried sisters in Wakefield. As Edith became increasingly unstable, periods of separation ensued, and eventually she was committed to an insane asylum.

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These experiences naturally shaped the many painful portrayals of marriage in Gissing's novels. They also mean that he knew what he was writing about, in his account of the marriage of an intellectual, Alfred Yule, to an uneducated woman, whose existence means that he is cut off from friends and equals (*New Grub Street*). Marian Yule, their only child, is painfully aware of her mother's lack of education, but loves her loyally, defending her from her father's tyrannical resentment. Yet Gissing had created this masterly picture before his own marriage to Edith made it all come true (although his earlier marriage had sufficiently intimated the scene). His marriages also provided the background to his treatments of alcoholism (*The Odd Women*, 1893), domestic violence (*The Nether World*, 1889), and despair (*passim*).

Gissing eventually, towards the end of his short life (he died at forty-six, of chronic lung disease), met a woman who made him happy: a French fan of his novels, Gabrielle Fleury. She nursed him through his last illness, in France.

What makes Gissing such a compelling writer? One thing is that the plots and subplots of his novels are so thoroughly integrated that the reader has an equally keen interest in both. For instance, reading *New Grub Street*, one cares just as much what happens to Marian and the unscrupulous journalist Jasper Milvain as about Reardon and his writer's block. But I think the main reason that his novels are so good is that the characters (or most of them: there are so many that a few must be relatively less successful) are well conceived and thoroughly developed. Gissing created people that you really care about.

One of his most attractive heroes is Sidney Kirkwood, of *The Nether World*. Sidney is a working man, self-educated, drawn to radical views, yet practical, kind, and self-denying. In the end, Sidney finds himself supporting, by his labor, not only his wife—a former actress whose face a jealous rival has scarred with acid—but her whole hopeless family as well. The final paragraph of the book is a statement of principle, that there are lives, even in the depths of society, which are not wasted:

> In each life little for congratulation. He [Sidney] with the ambitions of his youth frustrated; neither an artist, nor a leader of men in the battle for justice. She [Jane Snowdon, good but hopelessly impoverished by others' folly], no saviour of society by the force of a superb example; no daughter of the people, holding wealth in trust for the people's needs. Unmarked, unencouraged save by their love of uprightness and mercy, they stood by the side of those more hapless, brought some comfort to hearts less courageous than their own. Where they abode it was not all dark. Sorrow certainly awaited them, perchance defeat in even the humble aims that they had set themselves; but at least their lives would remain a protest against those brute forces of society which fill with wreck the abysses of the nether world.

To write convincingly as someone of the opposite sex is a telling test of a novelist, and here Gissing performs outstandingly well. The main characters of *The Odd Women*—which Gissing wrote over a seven-week period of marital chaos with Edith—are all female: Rhoda Nunn, the feminist, her friend Mary Barfoot, and memorably the sisters Alice, Virginia, and Monica Madden. Alice and Virginia teach, though unsuited for this occupation, and Virginia becomes a closet alcoholic, while the younger Monica, slaving in a dead-end job, marries an older man. He turns out to be psychopathically jealous. "The Woman Question" was not, for Gissing, the subject of superficial jesting. The book asks hard questions about future roles for women, and the future of marriage.

This is a theme explored under a microscope in *The Whirlpool*, which Orwell called a minor work, no doubt because its preoccupations are middle-class rather than working-class. Here Harvey Rolfe, an intellectual fortunate enough to have independ-

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ent means (unusual in a Gissing hero), marries a middle-class girl, Alma Frothingham. The question about whether Alma can or should continue with her chosen career in music—and whether she really possesses the talent to do so—is the central thread of the book, though, as always, there are subplots and numerous interesting minor characters. The marriage is not a success, spiraling downwards (the whirlpool of the title represents fashionable society) to the eventual suicide of Alma. But the themes would not be out of place in our Saturday newspaper feature articles. Gissing was, in terms of the family, remarkably prescient:

> "One lady wrote to me [says Harvey's friend Mary Abbott] that she would pay almost anything if I would take her little boy and keep him all the year round; she has only a small house, and the child utterly upsets her life. Of course, I understand her; I should have sympathized with her once."
>
> "It's intelligible enough," replied Harvey with a laugh. "Presently there will be huge establishments for the young children of middle-class people. Naturally, children are a nuisance; especially so if you live in a whirlpool. . . .
>
> "You know [Harvey continues], it isn't a matter of course for people to see that they are under an enormous obligation to the children they bring into the world; except in a parent here or there, that comes only with very favourable circumstances. When there's no leisure, no meditation, no peace or quietness—when, instead of conversing, people just nod or shout to each other as they spin round and round the gulf—men and women practically return to the state of savages in all that concerns their offspring. The brats have come into existence, and must make the best of it. Servants, governesses, schoolmasters—anybody but the parents—may give thought to children. Well, it's a matter for the individual. I shouldn't feel comfortable myself."
>
> "It's a matter for the world, too," said Mary.

Again, the discussions about child-rearing between Harvey and his friend Basil Morton (whose wife would be called a stay-at-home mother these days), show that Gissing thought deeply about these matters. As you might expect, Gissing's position on child-rearing and working mothers was, overall, conservative, but (unlike our Saturday reviews) he knew that Alma's and Harvey's problems are not to be simply solved, or in fact ever solved at all. Harvey envies the Mortons, whose life, he thinks, is so much simpler and more old-fashioned than his own.

In the end, it becomes fairly clear why Gissing's books have always appealed to a few rather than to many. He was a lonely, conservative atheist, a sensitive and loving observer of nature, devoted to the classics, and gifted as few writers have been in portraying lower-class and middle-class life, thought, and character. Readers who respond to him are likely to be outsiders, "born in exile" too.

For such readers, Gissing remains a companion for life. Orwell, shortly to die from lung disease himself, wrote triumphantly to Richard Rees in 1949, regarding his project to have a publisher reissue Gissing's novels: "Someone in the USA has managed to get me a copy of Gissing's *New Grub Street* at last. Don't lose *The Odd Women*, will you."

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Of human accomplishment

by Denis Dutton

Readers familiar with Charles Murray's work (*Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*) know that he is not a man to shy away from controversy or bold opinions. In *Human Accomplishment*,[1] Murray's aim is nothing less than to determine the geographic and chronological distribution of creative genius in science and the arts across the whole of the world during twenty-eight centuries, from 800 BC through 1950. It's a tall order. Murray assembles histories, surveys, and encyclopedias of the arts and sciences, 163 of them, and records their treatment of significant figures. Using an initial cut-off that leaves only individuals who are mentioned in at least 50 percent of his sources, he comes up with a list of 4002 writers, philosophers, mathematicians, musicians, poets, astronomers, painters, physicists, biologists, and innovators in technology. These are then rated in a system devised and refined in order to provide an objective assessment of high achievement across cultures and over the ages.

The leading names are predictable: Galileo, Newton, Einstein, and Darwin in the sciences, Beethoven and Bach in music, Shakespeare and Schiller in literature, Michelangelo in painting, Euler in mathematics, and so forth. Murray is at pains to eliminate Eurocentrism in his analysis: there is separate coverage of Chinese and of Indian philosophy to match Western philosophy, Chinese painting, Japanese art, Japanese literature, Arabic literature, and Chinese literature. These include, at a level he views as comparable to Aristotle and Mozart, such names as Gu Kaizhi, Basho, al-Mutanabbi, and Kalidasa. Murray's goal is not, however, merely to make a list of 4002 all-time greats. He wants to build up a general view of the historical conditions that allow for the flourishing of artistic and scientific innovation and discovery.

One of Murray's favorite ideas is contained in a quip he credits to his late colleague Richard J. Herrnstein: "It is easy to lie with statistics, but it's a lot easier to lie without them." It's a notion worth remembering in light of the sour reactions to his book from critics who don't like the idea of quantifying greatness. In *The New York Post*, Sam Munson wrote that "there is something disturbingly petty about creating indexes, tables, and rates of human accomplishment." Murray's "page-counting," Judith Shulevitz sniffed in *The New York Times*, seems the kind of thing that normally "would interest only those who find that sort of thing interesting," were it not for the fact that his conclusions seem as "fantastical" as something out of Borges. Along with other critics, Shulevitz tends to find the book typical of old-time social science:

1 *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 BC to 1950*, by Charles Murray; HarperCollins, 668 pages, $29.95.

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when it's right, it's bleeding obvious; when it's not obvious, it's wrong.

Granted that in some respects Murray's statistics drive him to conclusions not all that different from those of purely qualitative historians of genius and culture, such as Jacques Barzun and Harold Bloom. And when he does resort to humanistic sermons extolling great men and their masterworks, they come accompanied by tables and statistics lessons that many readers will find too tedious and wearying to study. This is a shame, for they will miss the heart of an impressively well-argued account of magnificent achievements of human history. For all his statistics, Murray does not promise or deliver certainty on the conditions for human accomplishment. Rather, he supplies data on which informed opinions, by him or by his critics, might be based.

Murray's method for identifying eminence by reputation follows a form set by Francis Galton's 1869 *Hereditary Genius*, which also used biographical literature quantitatively, as a platform for research. But the spirit of Murray's endeavor stretches back farther, to David Hume. In his essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757), Hume formulated the problem of evaluating artistic achievement. There is "a species of opinion," Hume observed, which holds that taste is subjective, beauty in the eye of the beholder, and that there can be no point in searching for standards in the arts. Many people find this an easy opinion to adopt, Hume writes, until someone forces it to its conclusion, declaring (say) that John Ogilby is as great a poet as John Milton. "The principle of the natural equality of tastes," Hume remarks, "is then totally forgot, and while we admit it on some occasions, where the objects seem near an equality, it appears an extravagant paradox, or rather a palpable absurdity, where objects so disproportioned are compared together."

Hume recognized works of art that pass what he called the Test of Time, works with the capacity to engage deep, permanent features of the human personality and are thus to be appreciated over the ages. (So the same Homer who pleased "at Athens and at Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London.") This shows, for Hume as for Murray, that objective achievements in the arts are demonstrable—and if they can be historically established for the arts, then they are even more clearly identifiable for the sciences. These two spheres of human endeavor represent two kinds of potential objectivity: there is as little chance of the human race giving up Homer or the Beethoven symphonies as there is that it will give up the notion that the earth is a sphere. Over time, achievement in the arts and the sciences is seen as not merely an invention of scholarship, a product of fickle fashion, or a general social construction. It is an objective fact about the real world.

Nevertheless, Murray does not glibly assume the reality of lasting values: he argues for them, scrappily, provocatively, with energy and conviction. In his introduction, he quotes St. Augustine in *City of God*, sounding, as Murray remarks, like a Victorian triumphalist: "What varieties has man found out in buildings, attires, husbandry, navigation, sculpture, and painting! . . . What million of invention has he [in] arms, engines, stratagems, and the like! . . . How large is the capacity of man!" The idea of progress, the notion that each generation builds a better world—by its own invention and discovery, standing on the shoulders of its forebears—is old indeed. It was prevalent for the last 600 years and has only recently fallen out of fashion among postmodernist intellectuals.

Intellectuals who dismiss progress—or who find attractive the idea of the Noble Savage, a person uncorrupted by civilization who lives a more deeply creative or authentic life than we can understand—have Murray's contempt. Nor has he patience with people who complain about technology and economic growth over their cellphones on the way to the airport. A little question does the trick for him on the issue of whether there is progress in science and technology:

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"Would you be willing to live your life at any time before the invention of antibiotics?"

Murray is more patient with circumspect objections to his argument. Throughout the book, he anticipates plausible objections to show how they can be addressed. For instance, he notes that his index scores for literature suffer from problems of chauvinism: there is a tendency for encyclopedia editors to give too much attention to their own national literatures. Murray overcomes this problem by eliminating from his figures coverage by encyclopedias of the national literatures of the encyclopedist. Shakespeare is at the top of the literary heap only because non-English sources placed him there. Goethe comes in second after eliminating all non-German sources. Again, a cleverly Humean strategy to counter local bias: "Authority or prejudice may give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator," Hume said, "but his reputation will never be durable or general. When his compositions are examined by posterity or by foreigners, the enchantment is dissipated, and his faults appear in their true colours."

Some readers will nonetheless not feel entirely happy with Murray's derived rankings, which can be odd despite his efforts to correct anomalies. His approach puts Michelangelo at the top of the list for Western art—but Picasso, *mirabile dictu*, comes in at number two, above Raphael, Leonardo, Titian, Dürer, and Rembrandt. Even Picasso's most generous admirers would have to see this as an artifact of a reliance of encyclopedias written during Picasso's age. Murray attributes this absurdly high placement not only to Picasso's art, but also to his "seminal role in several phases of the break with classicism" that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The anomalous ranking of Picasso highlights a potential source of error that Murray does not adequately acknowledge. Dictionaries of biography and encyclopedias tend to feature entries written by historians of art or science. The academic mindset of such scholars concentrates on historical importance in the arts, but it is also prone to confuse historical importance with aesthetic achievement. This problem shows itself clearly in Murray's inventory of accomplishment in Western music: Arnold Schoenberg stands above Brahms, Chopin, and Verdi. For good or ill, Schoenberg has affected the course of music just as Picasso has the history of painting, but to place his achievement above Brahms's makes as much sense as to place Picasso's above Rembrandt's. Schoenberg's nearly exact contemporary Rachmaninoff had no effect whatsoever on music history in the twentieth century; my guess is that his music will be performed much more frequently in the future than Schoenberg's. So which composer's "accomplishment" is the greater? Murray's methodology gives one answer, history will probably supply another.

Nevertheless, readers who tune out of Murray's analysis because of occasional weirdnesses and anomalies will miss much that is worthwhile. He shows that central Europe for a few hundred years has been the main scene of progress and innovation in the arts and sciences. Whatever their earlier or later contributions, China and India are outliers in the sciences, while the United States's contributions to both the arts and the sciences is comparatively slight. There are women in the inventories—Sappho, Hypatia, Lady Murasaki, Jane Austen, Madame Curie, and others—but Dead White Males, as Murray likes to call them, do most of the heavy lifting in his specified fields of intellectual accomplishment. (Why? Murray considers the usual roster of arguments—child-bearing, lack of female access to the professions, possible innate biological differences between the sexes.)

There is much for later readers and researchers to ponder in Murray's data. One arresting aspect of the book is the inclusion of European maps showing achievement in geographical distribution. The big four contributors to progress are Britain, France, Germany, and Italy; together they vastly

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exceed the combined contributions of all other European countries. Taken together, Murray's dotted and shaded European maps for science, art, music, and literatures are wonderful to study. The music map 1800–1950, for example, shows shadings in northern Italy and France, but is dominated by dots and a huge dark glob extending through the German-speaking parts of Europe. The science maps are more uniform, but dark areas in France and especially Britain counterbalance a densely speckled Germany. In the art map and the early science map, Italy makes all other countries literally pale by comparison. There is much to contemplate in these maps, not least of which is the historically variable borders of the land we would today call Germany: the Germans have spread enormous intellectual influence all over Europe at various times, and in the last two centuries significantly into the United States.

With his facts, graphs, and tables as support, Murray tackles the question of the general decline in the arts and sciences. The fall off in the accomplishment rate (significant figures per unit of population) is severe, especially since around 1800. And yet conditions that promote creativity—wealth, cities and their cultural endowments, communication, and political freedom—have not declined but improved in recent centuries. How is this possible? What does ignite the blaze of human creativity and achievement? Why does it die out?

The fundamental principle of human achievement is expressed by Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics* and accepted by philosophers since, and more recently even by psychologists: that human beings derive pleasure from the just exercise of their skills and capacities. From crossword puzzles and rock climbing to painting, composing music, playing a musical instrument, or solving equations, Murray says, "The pursuit of excellence is as natural as the pursuit of happiness." For the creative geniuses who are the subject of his book, I prefer to say that achieved excellence simply *is* happiness.

There are, according to Murray, four conditions for the highest realization of this innate impulse toward excellence. The sources of *energy for accomplishment* are a sense of (1) purpose and (2) personal autonomy. The sources for what he calls the *content of accomplishment* are (3) organizing structure and (4) transcendental goods. Here Murray moves, by his own admission, into an area beyond statistical demonstration; his data are relevant, and he thinks supportive, of these conclusions, but they are not decisive.

Purpose. Accomplishment "is fostered in a culture in which the most talented people believe that life has a purpose and that the function of life is to fulfill that purpose." Murray calls people who doubt or deny that life has a purpose "nihilists." Since accomplishment at the level Murray specifies requires enormous levels of work, nihilists are at a disadvantage. They lack a sense of vocation, either in the form of an idea that God has called them to a life of scientific or artistic endeavor, or, if they are not religious, in having a sense that they were put on earth to accomplish great things.

Autonomy. A culture that "encourages the belief that individuals can act efficaciously as individuals" will be best in encouraging human accomplishment. Freedom for the individual and tolerance of nonconformity are positive contributors to a climate of achievement. It is not only formal political control (e.g., dictatorship) that will discourage initiative, but strictures found in familism (which presumably helps explain relatively lower levels of scientific and technical accomplishment in cultures of east Asia and the relative lack of innovation in Asian art). A culture that fosters individualism stands a higher chance of producing significant creative individuals in art and science.

Organizing structure. "The magnitude and content of a stream of accomplishment in a given domain varies according to the richness and age of the organizing structure." In the sciences, "the structure from the Renaissance onward has been an evolv-

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ing scientific method." In the arts, structures present themselves differently: sonata form, *haiku*, Pointillism, the novel, and the motion picture are all organizing structures. All can be richly elaborated. Some structures are checkers-like in allowing a limited range of elaboration; others are more chess-like in their vast potential. Historical bursts of creative activity are initiated by theories, styles, and techniques (including the development of instruments, such as the spectroscope in physics or the grand piano in music) that open rich research or aesthetic possibilities. The age of an organizing structure is important: they are born, can have a vigorous youth, and then enter senescence, losing their potential to yield insights.

Transcendental goods. Accomplishment requires "a well-articulated vision of, and use of, the transcendental good relevant to that domain." These values are the true, the good, and the beautiful—the first central to science, the last to art, and the second to both science and art. Without a coherent sense of these values to underpin them, science and art may rise to "the highest rungs of craft," but they will not achieve exalted heights. A culture without a sense that science can reveal truth will never develop a stream of scientific accomplishment; a culture without a sense that beauty is real will never enjoy a great epoch of art, literature, or music: such artistic cultures are likely, as Murray puts it, to be "arid and ephemeral."

Of these four conditions, Murray places the most weight on the last. Taking into statistical account (1) the tendency of everyone to overrate more recent accomplishments, and (2) the worldwide rise in skilled, educated populations that might produce great scientists and artists, Murray finds it inescapable that accomplishment has been slumping since around the beginning of the nineteenth century. In this respect, anyway, he resembles such gloomy cultural observers as Nietzsche, Spengler, and Toynbee. Though he does not accept their versions of laws of history, he does present us with one last grand generalization. This idea is so important to him that it preoccupies him up to the last page of the book's main text (before the nearly 200 pages of tables, appendices, and notes). "Human beings," he claims, "have been most magnificently productive and reached their highest cultural peaks in the times and places where humans have thought most deeply about their place in the universe and been most convinced they have one." This for Murray helps explain the preponderance of achievement in the arts and sciences in Europe during the centuries when Christianity was regnant.

Truth, regarded as a goal guiding inquiry, may be considered a transcendental value for science. Art faces a different challenge. An ironic, detached culture in which artists have lost faith in ultimate values is not likely to rival the greatness of the past. In terms of freedom, wealth, creature comforts, and health, Murray says, we may be doing better than our forebears, but that does not mean that our artists will achieve more than "shiny, craftsmanlike entertainments." He quotes Gibbon's observation that even at the apex of their empire, the Romans, who looked back at the achievements of old Greece much as we do of old Europe, were "a race of pygmies."

Religion, Murray argues, "is indispensable for igniting great accomplishment in the arts." Religious believers and philosophers of a traditionally idealist stamp may find comfort in this, especially since it comes from an avowed agnostic such as Murray. I am personally not convinced. In particular, it seems to me that Murray seriously underestimates the role of organizing structures in creating conditions for high achievement.

Murray is right to stress the importance of *meaning it*—of commitment in the arts. He tells of the stonemasons who sculpted gargoyles on Gothic cathedrals. They worked with passionate devotion, even when their handiwork would be invisible from the ground: God would see it. I discovered a similar aesthetic psychology in my own

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fieldwork in New Guinea, where serious artists view a carving created for a dead ancestor differently from one knocked off for tourists. Much of our own art and entertainment is shallow and flashy, made neither for God nor ancestors, but for a market.

But, accepting this does not mean that transcendental values form a principle necessary to explain high achievement in the arts. Consider the history of music. Murray makes it clear that the invention of polyphony led to more complex structures that, along with improved instrumentation, continued through the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth. The Himalayan heights of music were reached 150 years later, from the middle of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. If there is progress in this period, it is the progress of artists who responded to the problems and potentialities inherent in musical tonality. New instruments, developing popular audiences, a sense of formal experimentation, and above all the maturing of tonality were the driving forces for the great flowering of music through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was, in other words, the birth, flourishing, and exhaustion of organizing structures, not transcendental values, that provided the most important motor for music development.

Murray argues that the greatest artists have "a vision of perfection" stirring them to greater achievements. This is true for some artists. But it slights the role of solving formal artistic problems—an important motive force even in so spiritually committed an artist as Bach. Think of Impressionism in painting; think of the rise of the novel from Cervantes and Richardson to Jane Austen. And there is nothing, by the way, nihilistic in the artistry of Jane Austen.

"Realized capacities are pleasing not only when they are exercised," Murray observes, "but also when they are seen to be realized." Right he is. We take pleasure in watching an athlete break a record, hearing a soprano in full flight, or reading a philosopher of depth and insight. Human accomplishment is the ultimate spectator sport. Apply as much historical analysis to it as we wish, and we'll not unlock all its mysteries. The continuous capacity of genius to surpass understanding remains a human constant.

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New poems
by Donald Justice, W. D. Snodgrass & Stephen Stepanchev

For Hugues Cuenod
—in his 100th year.

Midway along our road sometimes a voice
Sounds, prohibiting all heldenblustering choices
  Of timbre, overtones or fashions;
Fifty years back, when I first heard you sing
I thought: "The poems I've written lack for nothing
  But such clarity, such passion."

With Nadia Boulanger when young, you went
Touring through languages and continents,
  Collegia, festivals and venues;
To countertenor from youth's baritone,
You made each form, period and style your own,
  Tasting your way down this art's menu.

From Frescobaldi, Couperin, Monteverdi,
To Neidhardt, Bach, Schutz' Sacred Concerti
  Then Fauré, Debussy, Auric;
Di Lasso to "A Lover and His Lass,"
Josquin to Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress*.
  Machaut's Mass to Coward's *Bitter Sweet*.

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With an untroubled, easy grace and verve,
You'd fill in for a friend whose wrenched-up nerves
  Failed, sang through 60 years unchanged
By travel, time or untold cigarettes.
At 85, you called your debut at the Met
  "A little bonbon after lunch."

"How could I lose my voice," you were known to banter;
"I never had one"—just a dry, white, unmannered
  Mask tone with the bel canto breathing
That carried your song's deep impulse truly
From mouth to nerve ends like a fine, rich Pouilly.
  Why not just say: one voice for all seasons.

—W. D. Snodgrass

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A Chapter in the Life of Mr. Kehoe, Fisherman

Some nights on the dock,
When only scales
And a few popeyed fish-heads
Are left out for the moon
(Which the spread nets entangle),
There comes the sound
Of bare feet dancing,
Which is Mr. Kehoe,
Lindying solo,
Whirling, dipping,
In his long skirt
That swells and billows,
Turquoise and pink,
Mr. Kehoe in sequins,
Face turned upward,
Eyes half-shut, dreaming.

Sleep well, Mr. Kehoe.

—Donald Justice

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Losses

The earth, an oblate sphere, slows down,
Second by second, in its erratic, elliptical orbit,
As molten, metallic seas slosh around its interior.
The moon slides in and hooks onto twigs,
The fingertips of the beech, which assess the dark air.
I live in an as-if, subjunctive mode
Since our lives dropped their indicative.
A fraction of wall still stands nearby,
A fraction of my crumbling will.
Rocking, I draw a pail of stars
From the East River, which turn to tears.
My friends have all died or moved away.
The sky is snowing ash.

—*Stephen Stepanchev*

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Letter from Prague

Waiting for the golden pig

by Eric Ormsby

In the week before Christmas, carp farmers from Southern Bohemia begin setting up their tables in the center of Prague, and as Christmas Eve approaches the sounds of their mallets and cleavers echo through the ancient stony squares. The carp, who have spent the past year lolling on murky pond-bottoms, have been subjected since September to infusions of fresh water to remove their muddy flavor, and now they turn sluggishly in their tubs, their coarse scales a sooty emerald shade. When you select your fish, the salesman scoops it out in a net, lays it on a chopping board, and delivers two or three brutal whacks to its gasping head; he then runs a knife behind its gills and drains the blood into the gutter before slicing the still twitching thing into vivid pink fillets. The fishermen's aprons, the sidewalks, and the gutters run with blood and thick scales the size of a man's thumbnail. Czechs are the least sentimental of people, especially, it would seem, at Christmas-time.

Whenever I come upon the annual spectacle I remember Robert Lowell's lines about the Nativity—"The Child is born in blood, O child of blood"—and wonder whether this ubiquitous carp-whacking is not some dim re-enactment of the Massacre of the Innocents; but then, Czechs would doubtless dub me a rank sentimentalist.

I cannot say I share the Bohemian taste for bottom-feeders, a taste which shows up in other, less likely contexts. Over the past century, Czechs have produced art and music and literature which stand comparison with those of any modern nation; and yet, when it comes to foreign art and artists, their normally impeccable sense of fitness often deserts them. Their long isolation from the West no doubt accounts for this otherwise puzzling tendency, which was nowhere more apparent than in the splendid new Kampa Museum on the left bank of the Vltava, not far from the Charles Bridge. The museum was due to open two years ago but was inundated in the great flood of the Elbe and Vltava (the artworks were saved in the nick of time). The museum has now finally opened and the permanent collections are a marvel, drawn as they are from the lifelong efforts of Meda Mladek, the well-known, and formidable, Czech-American collector of the works of Kupka, Gutfreund, Kolář, and others, especially from the younger generation of Dissident artists. Ramming her project through the opposition of various bureaucrats and an outraged posse of Czech city-planners, the unstoppable octogenarian has erected what is easily the most beautiful new museum building in Prague. Inside the spacious and light-flooded galleries, carved out of the old Sova Mill (the sluices have been incorporated into the design), one proceeds through various levels, each with its own glass-floored terrace affording spectacular views of the old city. The jagged and sinuous Cubist sculptures of Otto Gutfreund,

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a visionary artist of genius who died in his late forties, reportedly of sheer exhaustion, are positioned with tactful delicacy amid the coolly blazing canvases of František Kupka in his more abstract mode. Outside the windows, and mounted on a dyke that juts into the river, stands the nine-foot-high sculpture of a massive rough-hewn wooden chair by the contemporary Czech artist Magdalena Jetelová. (The first chair-sculpture bobbed away in the flood, and its replacement has been fashioned from debris and flotsam collected after the waters subsided.)

Unfortunately, despite the unerring taste on exhibit in the main halls of the Kampa Museum, the administration has consigned an outbuilding to a retrospective of the work of Yoko Ono. Entitled with inadvertent exactitude "The Women's Room," the exhibition devotes lavish space to pitifully little indeed. The main "creation" on display consists of twenty-one utterly identical composite photos of Ms. Ono's father, husband, and son, all three of which mysteriously form a visage that is a dead-ringer for Yoko herself. The first photo bears the caption: "Doctor 1: I remember being born and looking into his eyes. He picked me up and slapped my bottom. I screamed." Yoko Ono notes that the series is meant to convey "what percentage of my life did I take it lying down?" (The "it" is tactfully left unspecified.) In the flagstone courtyard outside, Ms. Ono had a Christmas tree installed where visitors were invited to hang written messages promoting "world peace" (is anyone opposed?). Flipping through predictable pieties, I find on one the bracingly ungrateful comment: "Yoko Ono sucks."

No Czech I met professed admiration for this Ononistic exhibition; nevertheless, much hoopla surrounded it. There is, it seems, a palpable need to demonstrate that Praguers are firmly in the know, however egregious that savvy may prove to be. And indeed, at first glance, one might conclude that Czechs have given themselves over wholeheartedly to an indiscriminate and fervent consumerism that encompasses art as well as commerce. There are now brand-new shopping malls all over, such as the vast (and rather beautiful) new complex designed by Jean Nouvel in our Smíchov neighborhood which has not one, but two, vast "cineplexes," as well as boutiques—or *butiks*, as the Czechs call them—chock-full of designer goods at designer prices.

Four years ago, when I last spent a long visit in Prague, it was virtually impossible to find olive oil in any of the stores; now the shelves groan under every known olive oil from Sicily to Australia. Jewelry stores especially have proliferated, perhaps because the Russian Mafia, who are much in evidence throughout the Czech Republic (and especially in Marienbad and Carlsbad), employ them as money-laundering outlets. Their blazing display windows give new luster to the city's appellation of "Prague the Golden." (And in any case, the most overworked and best-loved word in the Czech language must be *zlatý* or "golden," which appears on innumerable shop signs.) But Czech shoppers have an unexpectedly affluent look too, and no one seems unduly perturbed about the proposed introduction of the euro in 2007, when prices are expected to skyrocket. According to the *Prague Post*, during this shopping season, they spent over one billion crowns more on gifts than in the preceding year. But while consumerism is firmly and visibly ensconced in Prague, it is far from representing the true face of Czech society, always well hidden.

Thus, a few days before Christmas, my Prague-born wife, Irena, and I were invited to a private caroling party, held by Czech architects, in "The King of Brabant," a Malá Strana pub. Wedged in on narrow benches and amply provided with foaming mugs of sublime Gambrinus beer and homemade sausages, we found ourselves amid some fifty full-voiced carolers, the men exuberantly bearded and moustachioed, the women lissom and willowy in the best post-revolutionary Czech mode. All knew by heart the words and tunes of scores of carols; even better, all knew how to sing

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and harmonize. Czech Christmas carols, or *koledy*, are very unlike our own. These carols are grave and tender and immensely moving; but just when you feel lured to the verge of unseemly sentiment, you're pulled back by wacky nonsense refrains, such as my own favorite: "*dudli dudli dudli dudli, dudli dudli dudli, dá.*"

The stubborn sense of belonging to a common culture, so obvious to an outsider like myself (and so scorned at present in North America in favor of a tinselled "diversity"), was made stronger and more poignant by the knowledge that certain of the carols, which sound so innocent, had been strictly forbidden for over forty years under the Communists on pain of imprisonment. These simple melodies in old Czech or Moravian dialect or Slovak shone like precious artifacts as the singers' voices rose, and it was clear even to me that to sing them was an act of fealty to a common past not to be forgotten or forsworn.

Consumerism may now be rampant in Prague, but that past is never very far away. Czechs, to their great credit, refuse to give in to a comfy amnesia. Two recently erected monuments attest to this with commendable tenacity. The first is the new memorial to the victims of Communism which was dedicated in late 2002 and which stands on Ujezd Street, directly across from the thriving Bohemia Bagel café. The memorial, by the well known Czech artist Olbram Zoubek, is deceptively simple in conception: a flight of wide stone steps leads in two distinct tiers from the sidewalk up the slope of Petřín Hill. The first nine steps are oversized and hard to maneuver; you have to stretch and grapple to climb them, and for good reason: at their base and running up the center of each step are strips of bronze enumerating the exact tally of the victims: 205,486 persons arrested, 248 hanged or beheaded, 4,500 dead in prison, 327 shot crossing the border, 170,938 driven into exile. For so small a nation these are crushing statistics. When you reach the landing and the upper flight of stairs, you encounter five bronze figures of naked men. The first, stooped, slack-jawed, in a posture of immense weariness, is whole. Each successive statue, however, has been progressively slashed and disfigured until the final figure displays nothing but a shard of torso and two mutilated legs. At night, from the Bridge of the Legions, the obliquely illuminated figures cast sharp shadows on the white steps and seem to loom out of some pitiless fog.

The war of the present with the past in Czech minds flared up when this memorial was unveiled. Many detested it and various protests erupted. Prague feminists objected vehemently to the fact that the five figures were male. Later, persons unknown planted explosives in two of the figures and blew them to smithereens. Nobody I spoke to believed that the feminists would go that far, but when I asked whether disgruntled members of the *ancien régime* might have been responsible, I got only non-committal shrugs in reply. The figures have been restored, and that is what matters most.

The second new monument is a towering statue of Franz Kafka, located near the venerable Spanish Synagogue, not far from Old Town Square. The Kafka industry seems a bit on the skids at present; the profusion of tee shirts, postcards, and other souvenirs has shrunk and even in the Kafka-Buchhandlung, in the old Kafka family house, the selection of the master's work is surprisingly skimpy, and the bookstore itself has been reduced by half. The Kafka monument, hewn from glossy black marble by the sculptor Jaroslav Rona, rises some ten feet in the air in the midst of a diminutive circle of black and white flagstones. Kafka is represented quite realistically in his trademark Homburg hat, three-piece suit and tie, and spiffy shoes, but instead of merely standing or strolling, he sits astride the shoulders of a huge empty suit which—headless, handless, and footless—looks to be shambling forward with its jaunty passenger.

Praguers have mixed feelings about the

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Kafka monument. There appears to be something a bit too confident, too optimistic, too poised about the statue that ill befits its subject. But the deliberate absurdity of the concept has its winning side: after all, who in his right mind would ever have conceived of an equestrian statue of Franz Kafka, presiding like some Habsburg potentate over his native stomping-grounds? The monument grows on you, and by the end of our stay I had even become rather fond of its improbable humor and brash momentum.

Not far away, a near contemporary of Kafka was enjoying an exuberant rediscovery. This was the artist and writer Josef Čapek, brother of the more famous writer Karel, whose Cubist-influenced paintings were on sumptuous display in the gallery of the Municipal House, that gorgeous art nouveau structure lovingly restored in the decade since 1989. The exhibition was entitled "The Humblest Art" and concentrated on Čapek's work in the early years of the past century; the title comes from his 1920 book of the same name in which the artist laid out his aesthetic credo.

Handpainted nineteenth-century signs advertising everything from coffee to shaving cream, engravings torn from old magazines, illustrations in penny-thrillers, all of them shrill, garish, lurid, and strangely innocent, supplied Čapek with the raw materials of his art. An early aficionado of the silent screen, he was much taken with the figure of Fantômas, that French detective series crammed with fiendish plots and crudely bedaggered villains, and the exhibition has one of these films running at one end of the gallery. The notion of "the humblest art," which entails the use and transformation of nondescript and commonplace objects from daily life, is of course no longer new, having become almost the dominant aesthetic theme for much of the intervening century; even so, Čapek's work retains a freshness and boldness that lifts it above the merely temporal. He had his own special gift for softening and injecting the gently humorous, even the tender, into the most austere Cubist geometries. His lurid painting of Fantômas, one of several, has the spectral glimmer of a geode in its panoply of hues but for all the menace of the knife-wielding malefactor, he is portrayed with an oblique affection; there is something forgiving, nearly companionable, even in Čapek's ostensibly bloodiest canvases.

According to time-honored Czech custom, if you fast on the day before Christmas you may be favored, as midnight approaches, with a vision of a golden pig. The apparition is considered highly auspicious, but I must confess that I have never seen so much as the tail of the fabled piglet. This whimsical tradition says much about the Czech attitude to the festive season; it is fanciful but it is also humorous. The ancient Israelites may have hankered after the Golden Calf, but Czechs prefer their fantasies to be earthier, basted in golden juices, enfolded in the magical but also palpable, as homely as the ingredients of a Čapek painting and so, true to life, yet hinting at grander and richer possibilities.

The solid unsentimentality of the Czech Christmas was brought home to me at the annual Christmas concert of the great Czech mezzo-soprano Dagmar Pecková, on December 21, in the Smetana Hall of the Municipal House. Pecková comes in for some sniping from her compatriots since, with her close-cropped head and austere dress, she resolutely refuses to play the diva; but when she opens her mouth to sing, all criticisms evaporate. While I knew that the singer would be magnificent—and she was, in both Wagner and Beethoven—I was not prepared for the conclusion of the concert. The last piece was by Zdeněk Fibich, who died in 1900, and was represented as a kind of musical "melodrama," with accompanying recitation by the singer and actress Zora Jandová of a poem by the great nineteenth-century poet Karel Jaromír Erben.

Erben wrote some of the most famous and compelling ballads in the Czech lan-

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guage, all of which manage to combine horrific subject matter with a grimly rollicking form, and the poem presented, entitled "Blessed Day" ("*Štědrý den*"), was no exception. This was "The Night Before Christmas" rewritten by Poe or H. P. Lovecraft, and as its ghastly stanzas unfurled the audience hushed in suspense-filled reverence. Two young girls gaze into a frozen lake and see their fortunes for the coming year mirrored there; one is promised a handsome fiancé, the other a cruel death. The prophecies come to pass, and the poem ends with the lucky girl mourning over the cold grave of her less fortunate friend. No golden pigs for her! Here is a sample of one of the more cheerful stanzas:

> One girl, with covered head,
> Is making baby clothes.
> The other, for three months dead,
> Rots in the cold black ground.

Zora Jandová recited the ballad from memory in a beautifully modulated voice to the accompaniment of the lugubrious and plangent strains of the orchestra; the performance sent shivers down my spine. I won't be gazing into any frozen lakes this winter! This was a bracing prelude to the obligatory carp soup on Christmas Eve.

Outside the Municipal House, on the upscale boulevard known as Na Přikopě where the most luxurious *butiks* are located, a few late Christmas shoppers were hurrying home, their arms laden with designer shopping-bags. The only pig, golden or otherwise, that I'd glimpsed in Prague this time had been in the ads for the film "Babe in the City"—translated somewhat unfortunately into Czech as *Prasátko v Městě*, roughly, "Swinelet on the Town"—and I was about to give up hope when I glimpsed flashes of gold along the foggy and damp-slicked cobblestones. As we neared, I saw that there were three young musicians in the shelter of a bus stop who formed a brass trio. They were playing the carols we had sung a week before. Trumpet, trombone, and French horn tootled melodiously, and, though their instrument cases brimmed with coins, the musicians were clearly playing for the sheer pleasure of it. I took it as a subtle reminder that however much Prague might change outwardly, a stubborn love of custom and a faithfulness to hard-won traditions would keep this most golden of cities firmly rooted to its ancient soil.

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Theater

Neil Simon: the goodbye guy

by Mark Steyn

There is one marvelous moment in *Rose's Dilemma* that will stay with me longer than anything else from this theater season. How many other theatergoers will remember it depends on how many are still in attendance and awake by that stage of the play: at the performance I caught, the customer on my left was dozing happily and the couple on the right cut their losses at intermission.

The author of *Rose's Dilemma* is Neil Simon. For thirty years, he was the most reliable joke machine on Broadway—plays (*Barefoot in the Park*) and musicals (*Sweet Charity*), plus more spin-offs to Hollywood (*The Goodbye Girl*) and TV (*The Odd Couple*) than most theater men of his generation combined, not to mention the transvestite rewrites (the all-girl version of *The Odd Couple*) and lame sequels (*The Odd Couple 2*) that few other playwrights get the chance to eke out a last drop or two of maximum mileage on. He's 76 now, which on Broadway is young. But he hasn't had a hit in a decade, and there's nothing so redundant as a commercial playwright who's uncommercial. Had the whole *Cats* thing not worked out for T. S. Eliot, he could have gone back to the day job at the bank and carried on writing the slim poetry volumes that sell 800 copies. But, if you've been operating at *Cats*-level most of your life, it's much harder to re-position yourself as a writer of small-scale, thoughtful, "serious" works.

So as *Rose's Dilemma* prepared for its debut, Doc Simon, master play fixer, carried on as usual. He wrote and re-wrote and re-wrote the re-writes, and Mary Tyler Moore, America's sitcom sweetheart, evidently had some difficulty adjusting not just to live theater but to the rigors of Simon-style play-doctoring. The gal who can turn the world on with her smile was a big turn-off to Simon. Two weeks before opening night, he wrote her an ultimatum and got his wife to deliver it to Mary's dressing room just before the Wednesday matinee: "Learn your lines or get out of my play." Through the Sixties, Seventies, and Eighties, most leading ladies would have opted for Option A. In the Nineties, it would still have been a tough call. But Miss Moore took thirty seconds to think it over and plumped for Option B.

Ha, scoffed Simon. A Rose by any other name couldn't smell any worse. So they sent on the understudy, Patricia Hodges. She learned her lines and, as directed by Lynne Meadow, accompanies them by oddly stilted arm-waving, as if she's either making a simultaneous silent-movie version, which isn't a bad idea, given the quality of the dialogue; or she's drowning and sending out a cry for help; or she's on the runway at LaGuardia guiding the plane to the gate, which isn't really necessary, as Simon's flight of fancy pretty much nose-dives into the briny thirty seconds after take-off.

Rose's Dilemma is a play about a ghost, a deceased lover who lives with Rose. But,

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because of the events prompted by Mr Simon's note, the ghost who hovers over the opening scene is that of Mary Tyler Moore. Was she wise to take the "get out of my play" option? The answer to that becomes obvious rather quickly. In the old days, that wouldn't have been a problem. Unfortunately for Simon, Miss Moore was conditional to the scale of the project. He's not on Broadway anymore: this play opened at the Manhattan Theatre Club on the unspoken assumption that, whether or not Simon was still box-office gold, MTM certainly was, and the novelty of seeing her on stage would result in a swift Broadway transfer. That won't happen now.

There are those close to the playwright who say he conceived this work as his adieu to the theater. It seems likely to prove so, though not in the sense he intended. Mary Tyler Moore is certainly the last star name he'll have the opportunity to chase out of a new play. What she's left behind is a strange mess that never quite comes clean about what it wants to be. For his own farewell, Mel Brooks, Simon's fellow gagsmith from the Sid Caesar days, decided to wring every final drop of juice out of an all-but-expired world and go out with one almighty celebration of corn and shtick: fifty or a hundred years from now, they'll revive *The Producers* without quite getting it but still relishing the rowdy spirit of a lost tradition. As an elegy to the theater, that's not a bad way to go.

Simon has opted for something somewhat more veiled. Indeed, the play's principal problem is that it's so closeted. The eponymous Rose is a Pulitzer-winning but now blocked playwright called Rose Steiner, who lives in East Hampton in a house she shares with the ghost of her deceased lover, Walsh McLaren (John Cullum). Miss Steiner, we learn, has had somewhat problematic relationships with the government, back in the McCarthy days, and, more generally, with the truth. Mr. McLaren is (or was) a boozy genius and writer of high-class detective fiction. Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett anyone? Miss Hellman died in 1984 and has been one of the hardest-working gals in showbiz ever since: whatever the defects of her own work, she can be relied on to show up in some other fellow's play at least two or three times a season—last year, it was in *Imaginary Friends*, where she was played by Swoosie Kurtz. When Simon first offered this piece in Los Angeles, it was *Rose and Walsh*, with Jane Alexander and Len Cariou, and hewed closer to the real-life specifics. Why he abandoned that approach I can't say. Perhaps he felt that Hellman's has become to the biographical dramatist what the namesake mayonnaise is to the rest of us: just open up the fridge and lay it on with a trowel. (Actually, in her posthumous ubiquity, Miss Hellman is more like Cheez-Whiz.) Or perhaps, while working on the play in California, he realized he had other things he wanted to say.

The result is that what starts out as *Blithe Spirit* with Lil and Dash (a fraught enough conceit) soon abandons that turf for even rockier ground. This Rose would smell as sweet as the fresh flowers she loves. She's super-sensual when it comes to the olefactory: "Did you ever really smell a strong interesting man? If they could bottle that, there'd be no lonely women in the world." But the flowers cost money and the free-spending Rose disdains the advice of her dogsbody Arlene to tighten her belt. Her late lover Walsh, who's haunted her life for five years and serves as her spectral sex partner (there's rather a lot of that), is now about to cease hanging around and check out in a more permanent sense. Quite why this really deadline looms is unclear: it's a device and Simon can't be bothered explaining it. But Walsh knows Rose is short of dough so he seeks to provide her with an insurance for her old age: an unpublished novel he tells her the whereabouts of. Unfortunately, the unpublished novel is also an unfinished novel. So the ghost writer needs a ghost writer to complete the book. This is also a bit puzzling: a ghost whose penis is in working order but not his typing finger? As

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everyone from J. M. Barrie to Frank Baum could tell you, whimsy requires internal reality. Still, if ghost writers are needed, there's a young chap called Gavin Clancy not too far away in Quogue.

That's the bare bones. As fleshed out by Simon, the First Act is the comedy, the Second's rather more somber—or, at any rate, sentimental. When I say Act One's the "comedy," I ought to clarify: it has the rhythm of a comedy, but it isn't, in fact, funny. It's like watching a template or dummy for a comedy in which the structure's been laid out but the text is just filler pending the arrival of the jokes. You sit there vaguely aware of the form—set-up, punchline, laugh cushion—but unable to spot the content. Miss Steiner, for example, for want of any other job offers, gives lectures at colleges, where, she says, "the standing ovations I got are still standing." I've being mulling that one over for weeks and I can't make head or tail of it. It has the form of something that sounds as if it ought to be funny, possibly a pun; it's delivered sardonically. Yet it does not in the end seem to be a "joke" at all.

There's an awful lot of that in this play, not least the almost suicidal determination to turn the word "Quogue" into a running joke. As place-names go, Quogue hasn't been funny since Jerome Kern and P. G. Wodehouse wrote "Let's Build a Little Bungalow in Quogue" for *The Riviera Girl* in 1917. It's a running joke that won't run, won't stroll, won't limp; it has to be forcibly dragged across the stage. Nonetheless, the author won't let up on the alleged hilarity of Quogue. Except to offer the kind of razor-sharp verbal sparring between his pair of couples that the Odd Couple and the Sunshine Boys would have jeered off-stage in the first read-through: Gavin and Arlene tell each other things like "I'm uptown, you're downtown." Simon became Broadway's most in-demand play doctor because of his ability to hear the audience, to know when they were with you, when you were losing them, and (a far more difficult trick) when they were laughing at a big joke that was distracting them from their engagement with the drama. All that seems to have gone. This is a weirdly tone-deaf work.

Kingsley Amis, who had a famously difficult relationship with his son Martin's novels, once made an observation about the older writer's fear of the younger, hipper, hotter crowd: "The younger writer is telling the older writer, 'It's not like that anymore. It's like this now.'" Given the catastrophic demographics of the western world, it seems unlikely that the Cult of Youth—the assumption that it's the young who always have something fresh and new to say—can survive much longer: by mid-century, most of Europe will be as wrinkly as Vienna is now, where the record stores have wall-to-wall waltzes and operettas with the hip-hop and techno squeezed into one bin down in the basement. But Amis père was able to make that remark because he was secure enough in his sense of what he did: he thought the young lions were mostly "buggering about" and he had no interest in monkeying with his own style in order to pass himself off as Britain's oldest most promising young novelist. For good or ill, that's what Mel Brooks does too: whether he's thirty or eighty, he's Mel Brooks. At *The Producers*, the fag jokes are a little more numerous than they would be if he'd done it in 1954, but that's about it.

At *Rose's Dilemma*, there are a few moments when Simon audibly creaks: Walsh has hidden his unpublished manuscript in a cabinet and, directing Rose to the location, he tells her to get down on her knees. "You haven't asked me to do that in a long time," she says. That might have passed muster on "Golden Girls" circa 1988, but, whatever its otherwise low standards, the second Clinton term raised the bar for oral-sex gags, and Simon's limp line can't rise to the occasion. He sounds old and tired, like the guy who doesn't know "it's like this now." But that's not the real problem. Unlike late Amis and Brooks, this play reeks of insecurity: it's not that Neil Simon is trying to do some younger punk's new shtick, but that he

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seems to have lost the knack of doing Neil Simon—or lost his faith in it.

Once you notice that, the play, bad as it is, falls into place. The real dilemma of *Rose's Dilemma* is that Simon can't quite decide whether he wants to work in his traditional vein or he wants to do something deep and personal, not just Broadway Yiddisher personal like his Brooklyn boyhood trilogy. After toying with a bit of literary biography for a scene or two, Rose stops being Lillian Hellman and becomes a woman who can't get over the death of her beloved. So you start to think of her as a distaff version of Simon thirty years ago, when he was devastated by the death of his first wife Joan and wrote the situation out in *Chapter Two*. But I don't think he's harking back to that period here.

When you strip the play down to the bones, the situation seems almost horribly pertinent: an older blocked playwright living with the spirit of a better writer and desperate to will him back into life one last time. It's not Hellmann and Hammett: it's the two halves of Neil Simon—the fellow he is now and the fellow he used to be. In his flop from a couple of seasons back, *45 Seconds from Broadway*, the Hit Street nostalgia seemed lazy and indulgent; now it just sounds self-pitying. "You sound," says Rose to Walsh, "like a caricature of yourself that fell off the wall at Sardi's"—which is a line so true it almost makes you wince. Simon's not the only writer that applies to; it could be said of any Broadway old-timer who knew the beat not just in the Thirties and Forties but up to the Eighties—because it's a world that now only exists in the caricatures on the wall at Sardi's. And those still alive must surely be aware of that.

So the ghost that haunts the play is Simon in his heyday. And the Simon of 2004 is like a guy at a ouija board session trying to get in touch with his old self. Is the Sardi's line the saddest one in the play? Or is it the more admiring zinger Rose ejaculates to Walsh? "I love it when you spit out the dialogue like fireworks." If only it were true.

In the Second Act, Simon dispenses with the non-funny funny stuff and, as if he's aware some of these lines cut too close, wanders off on an entirely different tack. There is a plot "surprise," which one would call a contrivance if not for the fact that it's barely contrived. It's about children estranged from parents and there seems no good reason why we couldn't have been given the information in Act One. But now the characters lurch through another gear-change and sound like they're auditioning deep thoughts for factory-made samplers: "I cherished all the letters you sent to me because that's all I could get from you. But it's hard to hug a letter."

It's hard to hug a letter? Simon used to be a patient of the celebrity therapist Mildred Newman, who offered those in her charge penetrating advice on how learning to love yourself is "like drilling a well to an untapped energy reserve." In Simon's play *Jake's Women*, after years of exposure to the "bromide-spouting" of a thinly disguised celebrity therapist, the protagonist pours scorn on her latest self-help manual, whose title he amends to *Love Yourself, Fuck Them*. But it's hard to be a credible Mildred Newman mocker when your own Great Thought is "It's hard to hug a letter."

Was there a computer malfunction and the play wound up going into production with a script compiled from all the discarded bits? By now the retreat to Neil Simon formula off-cuts hardly matters. By the top of the Second Act, we're in the middle of a painfully dishonest attempt to write a painfully honest play. That's where losing Mary Tyler Moore doesn't help. A star can glide over a character's inconsistencies, because, if you're a star, you're already a character. Patricia Hodges is a tall, desirable ash blonde: you can see why her ghost lover is hot for her, and she makes the references to ghost sex less cringe-making than they might otherwise be. But she's not big enough to impose herself on the role and submerge the incoherent character shifts in a star-sized performance. John

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Cullum does a nice job as Walsh and seems to take a sly pleasure in making the ghost's character far more of a living presence than the nominally still breathing parts. But MTC's Lynne Meadows has staged the play in a rather half-hearted fashion, as if she doesn't know how to make the case for it, and Thomas Lynch's tastefully restrained Hamptons beach house looks like a set for Any Play USA, with William Ivey Long's bland costumes doing the same.

As I left, I heard two matinee ladies grumbling to each other that there were no jokes in the play. Simon might have been better to do as George Abbott did on *Coquette* seventy years ago, when he was in rehearsal with a flat comedy about a ruined woman, and he decided, since the jokes were dying anyway, to play the thing for real, as an unrelentingly mawkish melodrama. It was the hit of the season. "I've never heard such weeping in the theater," he told me, with a cynical chuckle.

But Simon comes from a more cautious school of play doctoring. If there's a message to the play, it's another *Love Yourself, Fuck Them* quote-of-the-day sampler: "Sometimes you have to give up what you love," as Rose says—the theme of letting go of the past to embrace the present recurring in Simon's work for the last thirty years. But, if you had Simon's past, would you be so eager to move on? Sid Caesar telling your jokes. Frank Sinatra singing the song for your first movie. Gwen Verdon dancing in your musical. Neal Hefti scoring the theme for your hit TV show. Punching up the gags for what became the longest-running show on Broadway. It's not that it's over for you, it's that it's over for everyone—no theater writer will have the opportunity to be that prolific again. There are in-demand Broadway playwrights—Terrence McNally—but they're prized for their efficiency, not their box-office clout, and, even if they were bankable, it's hard to see them leveraging that into movies and TV.

And that brings us to that marvelous, memorable moment, after hours of stillborn gags and sentimental homilies. The play ends with the blocked writer and the dead writer alone together in an unsparing spotlight that seems to have nothing to do with the literal reality of where they're supposed to be. Rose says, "I always felt so safe in this house." And Walsh replies, "It's not your house anymore." They're not talking about the house in the Hamptons, but about "the house," the theater. "Blow out the light," says Walsh. And we're in darkness.

It's a spine-tingling close for anyone who loves the working theater, reminiscent of a song in Richard Rodgers's *I Remember Mama* (1979), a lackluster show redeemed by the presence of the last Rodgers waltz. Fifty-four years after his Broadway debut, you can hear the old man take his leave:

> "Time.
> Time.
> Time, how it flies
> When did it happen?
> Where were we looking?
> What were we list'ning to?"

Rodgers was dead eight months later. He had a similar problem to Simon's—he felt a composer only had a set number of tunes in him and by his late seventies he was bound to be running low. That seems to be the way it is with Simon and gags. But the playwright mourns not just himself but his chosen form. When you're a young man and the producer says he wants to do your play on Broadway, it never occurs to you that half-a-century later there might not be a "Broadway," and hardly any "plays." Mordecai Richler, a good friend to this magazine, used to say that a man writes because he's scared of death. You can smell that fear in this sad, flawed, self-pitying play, freighted with intimations of mortality—not Simon's, but the commercial theater's.

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Art

La Belle Fernande in Washington

by Karen Wilkin

In the fall of 1909, the young Pablo Picasso modeled a clay and plaster sculpture of a female head, a searching, experimental work that now, cast in bronze, is considered a modernist icon, a benchmark in the development of Cubism. *Head of a Woman (Fernande)* is both radically new and strangely traditional; it simultaneously questions and reaffirms the time-honored conception of sculpture as solid form. (At the time *Head of a Woman* was made, Picasso and his friend Juli González's reinvention of the discipline as open construction was still two decades in the future.) Confronted by the sculpture, you are acutely conscious of its dense singularity and just as acutely aware of the action of Picasso's hand, pinching and patting the clay, tweaking sharp-edged planes and squeezing blunt ones into being. Features—details of hair, a tensely turned neck—are all accounted for, translated into aggressive ridges and hollows where you might expect smoothly inflected volumes. Yet all of these ferocious articulations appear to emanate from a solid core, as though the urgently worked head were fraying where mass meets air. The dully reflective surface of the bronze accentuates this double reading, heightening material presence by emphasizing evidence of the artist's touch and dematerializing the sculpture through the play of light.

Recently, the National Gallery, Washington, D.C. acquired a bronze cast of *Head of a Woman (Fernande)*—a fine example, almost certainly made for Picasso's legendary dealer, Vollard, before 1932. This past fall, to celebrate, the museum presented "Picasso: The Cubist Portraits of Fernande Olivier," a fascinating, tightly focused examination of the nearly seventy studies Picasso made of his companion between the spring of 1909 and the winter of 1910.[1] The comprehensive, impressive assembly, drawn from private and public collections around the world, included both familiar and seldom seen works in a great variety of media: paintings and works on paper—oils, watercolors, gouaches, and drawings in everything from pencil to ink to charcoal to chalk—plus two 1909 plaster versions of the sculpture, used in making the first casts, one from the Latner Family Collection, Toronto, the other from the Nasher Collection, Dallas; photographs of works in the studio enriched the mix.

The eye-testing, exhilarating opportunity to compare the National Gallery's bronze with the two plasters and the plasters with each other was justification enough for the show. The opaque whiteness of the plasters revealed things about surface and structure far less visible in the bronze cast, while alterations in the reading of similar incidents provoked by the reflective properties of the

1 "Picasso: The Cubist Portraits of Fernande Olivier" was on view at the National Gallery, Washington, D.C. from October 1, 2003 to January 19, 2004. The exhibition will next be on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas, from February 14 to May 9, 2004.

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metal made you reevaluate the role of light in sculpture. (The complicated history of the plasters and the known casts of *Head of a Woman*, along with informative details about Picasso's process and technique, are discussed in an excellent catalogue essay by Valerie J. Fletcher.) But the show did more than provide a context for *Head of a Woman (Fernande)*; it also made you see this familiar work freshly and made you concentrate on a key moment in the development of Cubism: the summer of 1909, spent in Horta de Ebro, Spain, when Picasso wrestled a new pictorial language out of his admiration for Cézanne, his grounding in classicism, and his taste for the primitive.

One caveat. Even though unmistakable resemblances among the exhibited works made it evident that they all were "about" an identifiable individual, calling the show "portraits of Fernande Olivier" was slightly misleading. In picture after picture, the subject's full-cheeked oval face, high cheekbones, and powerful column of neck, the poise of her head and breadth of her forehead announced their common "source," often making you reconsider the place within Picasso's private history of paintings and drawings you had never consciously connected with Fernande Olivier. Yet none of these images was a portrait in the usual sense. It is unlikely that Fernande sat for any of them, no matter how much her presence, the distinctive aspects of her person, and her personality informed these manifestations of Picasso's early forays into what we now call Cubism. Uncharacteristically, the painter seems to have responded to the attributes of "La Belle Fernande" with dispassion and detachment, treating, at least in the works at the National Gallery, her features, body, stances, and even hair style simply as stimuli for the pursuit of formal imperatives. Not surprisingly, given Picasso's willful inventiveness, the exhibition's photographs of Fernande show a charming young woman with a less angular, softer face and a less swan-like neck than Picasso's improvisations would lead you to expect, as though, in his paintings and drawings "of" her, the combination of intense scrutiny and the effort to rethink how a face might be reconceived in formal terms had penetrated flesh and revealed otherwise invisible structure. In an interesting and intelligent catalogue essay —if you overlook the frightful, jargon-laden prose—the exhibition's curator, Jeffrey Weiss, characterizes this as a substitution of a "typological or structural language for a descriptive one."

Throughout his long life, Picasso remained faithful to the essentially traditional idea that the human figure, especially the female figure, was the most significant subject for the artist to address. (Yes, I know all about his demeaning presentation of the female as available to the male gaze, about image-making as a kind of possession, and all the rest of the contemporary art historian's *shtick* in relation to Picasso, not to mention the well-documented, much discussed links between his stylistic shifts, his subject matter, and his domestic and/or erotic arrangements.) Early on, when Picasso and his "pard" Georges Braque invented Cubism together—"roped together like mountain climbers," as they put it—Braque realized that the parallel universe they were creating seemed most convincing when its nominal subjects were familiar objects, which could easily be reinvented life size within the confines of the canvas. Using the figure or landscape motifs usually entailed reduction, but with still life, the one-on-one relationship (and differences) between a real wine glass and a fragmented Cubist equivalent became part of the meaning of the work. Although Braque painted some notable pared-down landscapes punctuated with geometric houses, in those early years, he considered a still life of musical instruments to be his first truly Cubist painting. Picasso clearly understood this—think of the celebrated sculpture of the glass of absinthe with the real spoon or the stunning 1909 still life, now in Basel, of loaves of bread and a fruit dish on a table—but unlike Braque, who was admittedly a famously uninspired painter of the figure, he continued to be enthralled and challenged by

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the human form. It's worth noting, though, that Picasso's most potent figures, from *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* on, including the best works in the National Gallery's exhibition, were usually life size or slightly larger, like Braque's still life objects.

In the months of 1909 documented by the National Gallery's exhibition, Picasso was simultaneously inventing and discovering the language of Cubism, pitting his protean talent and powerful intuition against his equally powerful will. The show allowed you to watch him testing alternatives, reinventing, hardening, and devouring form at the same time. Anatomy abruptly becomes architecture. A nose becomes a long, pure, triangular solid, deployed above an upper lip *cum* pleated fan that doubles and reverses the massive form above it. A chin becomes a sculptural polyhedron. Cheeks, a jaw, ears, and eye sockets inspire brittle layers of curved planes that, in turn, generate new forms that only tenuously echo their sources. Drawings of standing nudes argue persuasively for the influence of both Cézanne's bathers and Matisse's expressively simplified, seminal figures of the previous two years, themselves an homage to Cézanne. A few drawings fracture the nude into loose gatherings of geometric planes, but most read as though Picasso had mentally chiseled away every curve and swelling of the female body to create a new race of sharp-edged, massive women, implacable, confrontational, and so physically coherent that they could be carved from solid rock. (The fluctuating overlaps and transparencies of "developed" Analytic Cubism were yet to come.) These sculptural qualities were so dominant in the majority of the works under review, in fact, that Picasso's venture into three-dimensions in *Head of a Woman* seemed not only inevitable, but the only logical next step.

The paradox is that if Picasso's Cubist paintings of Fernande (to employ the show's useful shorthand) often look as though he was thinking about the figure as a solid, faceted, potentially free-standing form in space, *Head of a Woman (Fernande)* suggests that he was thinking of the sculpture as a three-dimensional equivalent of the prismatic planes of the paintings. *Head of a Woman* makes the spatial complexities suggested by Picasso's paintings and drawings of Fernande not only actual, but also aggressively physical, but there is plainly an enormous difference between suggesting fictive planes, however illusionistic, with touches of pigment on the surface of a canvas and literally modeling those planes in brute, tactile *stuff*. Perhaps Picasso's experience of making those planes real, by patting and squeezing them into three-dimensional existence, played a role in the way Cubist painting developed. Over the next three years or so, in both Braque's and Picasso's work, angular "carved" masses in fictive space gave way to unstable, intangible transparencies, staccato touches of the brush, and floating lines. (Picasso, of course, never wholly abandoned the idea that a painting was, in some way, a depiction of forms in space; the most obvious difference between Picasso's and Braque's work, during the crucial years of their closest alliance, is that Braque's images exist only in painterly terms; they are about disposing pigment across the surface of the canvas to suggest pictorial events with no other possible existence, while Picasso's painted planes retain a powerful illusionistic presence.) In Washington, this surmise was strengthened by the inclusion of a few paintings from the winter of 1909–1910—that is, post-*Head of a Woman*—in which the tightly articulated angularities of the earlier figures begin to loosen and slide into a more ambiguous relationship to the plane of the canvas. These pictures, in turn, sent you back to the three versions of *Head of a Woman (Fernande)*, not simply to revel in the rare opportunity of seeing them together, but to ponder the differences between painting and sculpture. That combination of mental workout and aesthetic pleasure was itself worth the trip to Washington.

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Armchair adventures

by James Panero

What if Homer had decided to be post-Homeric: stories about heroes? Been there. Linear B? Done that. The new thing: Homer sings his poems into an amphora—instead of writing them down—and deposits the vase in the Hellespont. He then composes a "text" about his conceptual, subversive act.

In 1970, the earth artist Robert Smithson—no Homer, granted—promoted a similar stunt. He gave orders in Utah for the boys to get to work on his *Spiral Jetty*. Two dump trucks, a tractor, and a front-end loader belched diesel fumes into the air as the cameras rolled. Plans were consulted, maps drawn up, "texts" written, laborers labored. Six-thousand-plus rock-tons later, coiling out 1500 feet in the Great Salt Lake, *Jetty* emerged from the soft salt bed. Yet in the spirit of Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York* from a decade before, Smithson prayed for the destruction of his own work of art. And nature obliged. Smithson's conceptual affront to the gallery system, funded by the Virginia Dwan Gallery of New York, was inundated soon after completion, rather unexpectedly, by the rising waters of the Great Salt Lake. Underwater, in the middle-of-nowhere, Utah, *Spiral Jetty* became a great and lasting sensation. Smithson had triumphed. Formalism was out. Entropy was in. So much so that when *Spiral Jetty* began re-emerging during a dry spell in the late 1990s, one artist saw fit to generate his own entropy: he rolled a part of *Jetty* back into the lake. (Now the Dia Foundation—which took control of *Jetty* in 1999—wonders if the work of art can be saved from the rising tides. Oh my dear Dia.)

What does it mean when Robert Smithson sinks a swirl of stone in Utah? Or when the minimalist artist Tony Smith announces that a drive on the New Jersey Turnpike spells for him the end of art? Or when MOMA's alternative art space PS 1 mounts an installation piece in the back of its boiler room, or in its attic, or its stairwell, or its basement washroom? You really cannot take it with you. Dia may be able to fit a tilted arc in its factory space at Beacon. Do not expect the same luxury in your walk-up apartment. More than an attack on the gallery system, late modern art has mounted a serious challenge to private, domestic collection, and in turn to the notion of art as the home-bound narrator of more exotic tales. With earth art like *Spiral Jetty*—as with minimalist art, conceptual art, and installation art—we get something like the romantic mode in reverse: the domestication of the exotic.

Is it a trend? Perhaps. The last thirty years may have been a long, slow dirge for private art—but with codas and major-key refrains, the art world has witnessed many happy exceptions to its own rule.

Joe Zucker started out in the late 1960s as a Chicago-based artist by drawing whimsical and fantastic images of pirate ships and far-

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off locales. Since then, and after moving to Long Island, he has continued striving, seeking, and finding with unexpected results. In New York this month, Zucker is enjoying two simultaneous exhibitions: a show of drawings ranging from 1977 to 2003 at Nolan/Eckman Gallery in Soho, and a tightly arranged exhibition called "Joe Zucker Unhinged," of ships and houses and scenes created in a similar system, at Paul Kasmin Gallery in Chelsea.[1]

The innocent whimsy one finds in Zucker's drawings is instantly likable. His handwritten narratives and descriptions, found inked at the bottom of many of the pieces at Nolan/Eckman, deserve quotation:

> Admiral Don Alfonso, Luis, Kent, Vagas, Billy Joe, Don Alvarez, Rodrigues, self-appointed majesty and governor of all Boro Bula and his parrot Bombo waiting for his flagship: the George Moore. (*Admiral Don Alfonso* [1976])

> The ghostly spectre of the slaver Trinidad rises among the wrecks and reefs of Madagascar on a moonlit night during July of 1834. Notice the Saint Elmo's fire in the spans and masthead. (*Slaver Trinidad* [1978])

> Not aware that the bristles used in his favorite filbert brushes came from the tail of the very beast he sits astride, Douanier Rousseau watches his faithful studio assistant Hassau set up his easel near the Giza pyramid complex outside of Cairo Egypt (*Not Aware that the Bristles* [1996])

Zucker's interest in such fictional exactitude extends to his diagrammatic images like *Axe Lake (Legend)* (1994), where he has created a grid of a lake surrounded by a comprehensive key that includes everything from fish to fowl, logging buildings to mills, "vodka martinis" to "gibsons."

While Zucker lets his pictorial and interpretive imagination run loose in his drawings, his paintings now at Paul Kasmin are nothing if not chaste. In reproduction, I would even call them uninteresting. Zucker begins with large canvas squares of equal size. He divides each square into simple geometric shapes with inch-high wood ribbings, sometimes mapping out images of sailboats in shorthand. Other times more abstract patterns emerge, such as with *Interior #2* (2002). Held flat or at slight angles, Zucker then pours acrylic paints of various colors into each triangle, rectangle, and odd polygon. What keeps all this from the prosaic is the viscous, rippled, bubbled, and sometime cracked surface treatment that results. Above or beside each square, Zucker has positioned another square of equal size, produced in the same way but of solid color—an abstract colorfield forming a sky and foil to its more pictorial counterpart. *Catch*, *Yawl*, *Schooner*, *Sloop*: Zucker knows his boats as well as he knows form. The diagrammatic impulse from the drawings carries through, but here the wild fancy has been replaced by a quiet poetry.

We always knew Philip Pearlstein was good, and with his latest exhibition of work at Robert Miller in Chelsea—his fourth at the gallery, in fact—he's up to much of the same thing he's been doing for the past twenty years.[2] But is it possible that Pearlstein is getting better at it? Yes, it is possible. Here are the famous fleshy nudes, the odd angles, the commercial detritus and exotic bric-à-brac. The lion and snake sculpture? Yes. The rugs? Check. The mummy balloon and clear inflatable pool chair? Double check. What gets amplified in this show is the tension within many of the works, both formal and compositional, and the clarity of the visual language. The pairings of objects and nudes come off as more invasive—the objects more in-

1 "Joe Zucker: Unhinged" at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, and the concurrent show "Joe Zucker: Drawings 1977–2003" at Nolan/Eckman Gallery, New York, opened on January 8 and remain on view through February 7, 2004.

2 "Philip Pearlstein" opened at Robert Miller Gallery, New York, on January 8 and remains on view through February 7, 2004.

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vidious—the nudes more at risk. *Model with Duck Kiddie Car on Bedouin Rug* (2003) is one example. Here the model does not merely languish over the canvas; by showing us the kiddie car wheels and by cropping the head of his nude (not really a "subject"—the nudes rarely are), Pearlstein hints at the potential for a serious trip and fall: nudes and duck kiddie cars should not mix. Other examples are *Two Models with Old Whirly-Gig: When the Wind Blows the Figures Work* (2003) and the similar image in watercolor, *Male and Female Models with Whirly-Gig #1* (2002). Here an antique New England weathervane of miniature woodmen chopping and sawing logs (the figures work, as the title suggests) is positioned a little too close for comfort to the nude male model's—well, you know where this is going. In his execution, Pearlstein reveals a dry wit as well as a penchant for the squirmy. Other ominous objects may be found in *Model with Butcher's Sign* (2003) and *Model with Old Iron Butcher Sign #2* (2003), where the green iron monstrosity of the butcher sign might as well be a Victorian IUD. Elsewhere, toy jumbo jets dive and Mickey Mouses stare out across the nude tableaux like unwelcome babes from toyland. Philip Pearlstein has been meditating on the domestic scene for years—the clutter only gets worse.

If only artists still thought small. The most tempting show this month may be "Antoine-Louis Barye and the American Collector" at James Graham.[3] Could there be anything more outré than a French artist (born 1795) who trained under François-Joseph Bosio and Antoine-Jean Gros only to become an *animalier* sculptor, and with desktop-size work to boot? In different hands, the results might have been disastrous. Yet very few of the over one-hundred pieces at James Graham disappoint. Barye was once called the "Michelangelo of the menagerie," and the appellation suits. Barye could take an intimate knowledge of animal anatomy and pit such beasts against each other in ways that might put the *Death of Laocoön* to shame: his animals scratch, gnash, spring, and claw at one another; they twist around their prey. Elephants crush tigers; lions attack horses; bears wrestle each other; kites pick off hares; snakes hiss at lions (some of the models have an uncanny resemblance to the animal models in Pearlstein's paintings). One of the notable features of the current catalogue is the index checklist, which divides the animals on display into the following categories: "Figurative," "Equine," "Cervine," "Feline," "Bovine," "Ursine," "Avian," "Reptilian," "Elephantine," "Canine," "Leporine," and "Primates." I may have missed one or two, but you get the idea.

The show, curated by Cameron M. Shay, has been partially titled "the American Collector." William T. Walters, a Baltimore businessman, took an interest in Barye a year before the sculptor's death in 1875. Walters commissioned a cast of over one hundred bronzes in Barye's collection, creating a sizable American presence for the French sculptor. Several of the works in the show are on loan from private collections; James Graham & Sons has also identified the foundry and cold stamps for each piece.

The delight with Barye is in the details: a curling tail, a twisting neck, a cracked hoof. One Barye collector, quoting his father in the show's catalogue, remarked: "they'll look good in your law office someday." Alas, this is the sort of statement that might get you fired from *Artforum* magazine.

When *Spiral Jetty* sank into the Great Salt Lake, one wonders if its advocates realized what had been lost in the inundation. Here's a hint: it wasn't a pile of rocks.

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3 "Antoine-Louis Barye and the American Collector" opened at James Graham & Sons, New York, on January 17 and remains on view through February 28, 2004. A catalogue of the show, edited by Cameron M. Shay, Carrie V. Hart, and Katie Clifford, has been published by the gallery.

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Music

"Cellini" at the MET

by James F. Penrose

"Malvenuto Cellini"? How astonishing that the public dismissed Berlioz's early opera *Benvenuto Cellini* with that contemptuous epithet. Luscious arias for the female roles, astonishing rhythmic innovations, a dramatic score that transcends a libretto that itself was the only reason the opera was ever written—*Benvenuto Cellini* has it all. How could Berlioz's contemporaries not respond to this delightful work? In fact, the sorry reception of *Benvenuto Cellini* established a pattern that echoed throughout the unhappy career of this man who—as he wrote in his bitterly funny *Mémoires*—"had the imprudence to be born in a not very musical nation at a not very musical time."

Berlioz recounts the origins of *Benvenuto Cellini* in his splendid *Mémoires*. He was thirty-one and earning his living as a musical journalist when he came across the autobiographical *Vita* of the great Renaissance sculptor and goldsmith. "I had the misfortune," Berlioz noted dryly, "to believe that [it] would make an interesting and dramatic subject for an opera." Not surprising: Cellini's themes of artistic struggle, the battle against corruption, and the consequences of passion were themes that resonated powerfully in Berlioz's life. Berlioz asked his friends Auguste Barbier and Léon de Wailly to prepare a libretto for the Opéra Comique. They did. It was promptly rejected. The Paris Opéra later accepted an altered version. Nevertheless, things were not promising. The administrator of the Opéra, Charles-Edmond Duponchel, whom Heinrich Heine once described as "a yellow little man who looked like an undertaker," viewed Berlioz's music as "a conglomeration of absurdities beyond human redemption." Berlioz scored the work over the next eighteen months with financial support from his friend Ernest Legouvé.

Benvenuto was rehearsed in mid-1838 ("I shall never forget the horror of those three months") and was premiered on September 10. Despite the brevity of his time as critic for the *Journal des Débats*, Berlioz had managed to cultivate a number of influential enemies. The première, Berlioz wrote, "was hissed with exemplary precision and energy." The lead, fearing for his reputation, feigned illness after three performances. He had no understudy. The conductor could (or would) not master the complex score. The administrator, Duponchel, offered no support. Add to these problems the poisonous political atmosphere of the Paris Opéra, which looked askance at all works not in the approved Rossini-Meyerbeer-Scribe format, and it is something of a miracle that *Benvenuto Cellini* was ever performed at all. "Theatres are to music as brothels are to love," Berlioz would later write, "with machinists, wardrobe-mistresses and under-candlesnuffers" all having more power over the work than the composer.

Benvenuto is set against a background of rivalry in art and love. Pope Clement VII has

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chosen Cellini over his rival Fieramosca to create a statue of Perseus. The Pope's treasurer, Balducci, attempts to re-open negotiations after Cellini has started work. Cellini, however, has also bested Fieramosca in the rivalry for the affections of Balducci's daughter, Teresa. In the first act, Teresa and Cellini agree on Shrove Monday to elope but are overheard by the eavesdropping Fieramosca. The following day, Balducci pays Cellini's assistant, Ascanio, for the statue, but only a fraction of what was due. Later, at the Mardi Gras carnival, Cellini's friends avenge him by performing a burlesque of Balducci, while Teresa and Cellini attempt to escape. The lovelorn Fieramosca and his accomplice, Pompeo, interrupt their plans. A fight begins, and Cellini kills Pompeo just as the bells toll to announce the beginning of Lent.

In the second act, Cellini has fled to his studio where he first meets Ascanio and Teresa. Enter Balducci and Fieramosca, who accuse Cellini of murder and abduction. Cellini is about to be led away when an irritated Pope arrives looking for his statue. Cellini threatens to destroy the mold if he doesn't get his full fee, a pardon, and Teresa's hand, and the Pope threatens to destroy Cellini if he doesn't get Perseus by the end of the day. After Cellini avoids a Fieramosca-led strike, the statue is cast. He overcomes a shortage of material by throwing his other finished creations into the smelter—a gesture that must have amused Berlioz as he similarly used music from many of his other works in *Benvenuto*.

The performance on December 15, 2003, at the Met was mixed. Orchestral parts were subtly voiced and fully displayed the sweetness of Berlioz's harmonies. Isabel Bayrakdarian was a touching, enthusiastic, and virtuosic Teresa. Her aria in the first act, "Entre l'amour et le devoir," and the following "Quand j'aurai votre âge," were technically very good, and her ensemble work with John Del Carlo's bumptious Balducci was equally fine. Although Berlioz gave his female roles the opera's most arresting music, Marcello Giordani delivered a convincing Cellini. Alan Opie's acting of Fieramosca was initially more farcical than poignant, but he lived up to Berlioz's sympathy for the brokenhearted in singing the first-act aria "Ah! Qui pourrait me résister?" Kristine Jepson was an engaging Ascanio. Her "Mais qu'ai-je donc?" sung before the drawn curtain, received the night's most prolonged applause. The Pope, sung by Robert Lloyd, was the picture of menacing comedy. The Pope's wonderful accompaniment, all in deep brasses, creates a wonderful atmosphere of foreboding and power. Berlioz used much of this material twenty years later for Narbal's admonitory aria in *Les Troyens*. The Pope's perfunctory absolution of Cellini's murder "sans confession" (which caused considerable offense at the première) got a nice snicker. Throughout the opera, the chorus was very fine: precise attacks, controlled peaking, good balance.

If the performance was musically impressive, however, the staging was made up of a host of little irritations. What was most bizarre? The spectacle of the entire Roman population dressed for *commedia dell'arte*? The squadron of stair-sweeping pastry chefs? The nonchalantly promenading figure of death carrying a scythe? The leering voyeurs populating even the most intimate scenes? The golden masks bobbing in time? The bushes with feet? The red cardinals doing God-knows-what? The Ganymedes modeling for Perseus? It is true Berlioz called for a crowd of neighbors and servants—but cavorting like *this*? Wagner's term for this sort of spectacle was "effects without causes." The silliest excess, however, was the figure of Berlioz himself, appearing throughout the production as some sort of musical amanuensis, silently recording the proceedings for incorporation into some future opera. Only the grandeur of the opera's concluding music kept this listener from hissing with exemplary precision and energy.

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The media

Beast-man politics

by James Bowman

In late December and early January, the repose of my study was disturbed by a sound-truck belonging to Lyndon LaRouche—sometimes on its own, blaring beneath my window, and sometimes as part of a minuscule procession, a pathetic gaggle of LaRouche's lunatic supporters. On one occasion there was a flat-bed truck with half-a-dozen people standing on it and beating their breasts against the cold—or possibly for joy—while purporting to represent "the LaRouche youth movement." Someone banged a drum and all cheered to the strains of the Hallelujah Chorus, blaring through the speakers. On the side of the truck was a banner which read: "Dump Cheney, Vote LaRouche"—which to say the least of it shows an imperfect understanding of the way our electoral system works.

You would think young people, especially, would be ashamed to make such a public spectacle of themselves, but like derelicts mumbling to themselves in the street, like LaRouche himself, they seem to take a grim satisfaction in their isolation and unpopularity, as if the repugnance with which the common opinion of their fellow-countrymen regards them was itself an infallible sign of the correctness of their views. A moment's attention to these, as revealed on the website LaRouchein2004.net, is all that is required to understand the nature of the paranoid delusions under which this convicted felon suffers. His political opponents are to him "fascist scum," and he is particularly wroth, for some reason, with Vice President Dick Cheney, whom he seldom refers to without the epithet "Beast-man" and whom he calls "the self-anointed Grand Inquisitor of the Bush administration."

Others caught in the spotlight of one of LaRouche's ferocious hatreds include the House of Representatives Majority Leader Tom DeLay ("a freak salvaged from Washington, D.C.'s political equivalent of 'Skid Row' . . . a 'zombie-like' synthetic personality taken over by something like the psychopathological equivalent of 'the body-snatchers from outer space'"), Newt Gingrich ("an incarnate, Phrygian-capped dionysiac en route to establishing a fascist [e.g., Napoleonic reactionary tyranny] in the U.S.A."), the late "fascist philosopher" Leo Strauss and all those, such as Richard Perle ("fascist scum . . . former errand boy for the Senator from Boeing), deemed to be his followers—as well as, oddly, George Soros, who certainly seems to hate the Bush administration as much as LaRouche does but who, unlike him, also advocates the legalization of certain hitherto illegal drugs.

At eighty-one and fresh from the publication of *Children of Satan II: The Beast Men*, yet another of his pamphlets purporting to reveal the connections between the Spanish Inquisition, the French Revolution, the Third Reich, and Dick Cheney, LaRouche was running in the Washington, D.C. primary for the Democratic nomina-

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tion for the presidency. If you didn't otherwise know he was a fruitcake, that would tell you, since the primary is not only nonbinding but officially shunned by the Democratic National Committee and all the major Democratic candidates save Howard Dean, since it is in violation of the party rule that no primary shall be held before New Hampshire's. But perhaps LaRouche thought he had a chance to streak past the likes of Dennis Kucinich and Carol Moseley Braun and finish second to Dean. Of course, that didn't happen. Instead, it was the Rev. Al Sharpton who got this much-coveted bit of electoral momentum going into Iowa and New Hampshire.

All LaRouche succeeded in doing was disturbing the peace of the city for some weeks to no particular end but the gratification of his own conceit of himself as a "leader." During that time, he began all his campaign announcements, even those by the sound-truck, with the words: "This is Lyndon LaRouche, candidate for Democratic party nomination for president. I have approved the following message"—as if we were all as paranoid as he, so that it were necessary to forestall the suspicion that he might be reading a message he had *not* approved. The idea seemed to be to convey the impression that he headed up some vast organization where eager underlings were constantly producing shiny new policy statements to his specifications and bringing them to him for his approval. Naturally, he assumes that prestige attaches to having someone else write his words for him, rather than to writing them himself—which one assumes he actually does, since they all sound alike.

Yet in a way LaRouche is precisely the visionary he imagines himself to be, for it is obvious that, although he himself may never be elected to anything, his day has come in American politics. This is not just because it is possible to hear from many of the more sane and respectable Democratic opponents of the Bush administration language very similar to that of the LaRouchians' warnings against, as they put it, "the Straussians' commitment to transform the United States from a democratic republic into a tyranny, using the events of Sept. 11, 2001 as their 'Reichstag fire,' to justify the overthrow of our Constitutional system." Conspiracy mania, though usually kept just off-stage, has long been a temptation for parties out of power in America, and it all tends to sound pretty much the same. But conspiracy mania is flourishing today as it has seldom done before in America, and not just at the fringes where the mainstream press would once have disdained to venture, because the standards of discourse have been cut free from their moorings in a common culture. As a result, anyone can say anything.

To be sure, free speech being guaranteed by the Constitution, which is as yet unoverthrown, anyone has always been able to say anything. Or almost anything. But mostly anyone hasn't. Or anyone who wasn't an obvious addlepate like LaRouche. The customs by which political debate has remained subject to certain restraints of manners, reticence, respect for one's opponents, and democratic forbearance seem to me at this stage of the campaign finally to have worn away. The advocates of this candidate or the other are generally supposed to have the right, in honor and decency as well as in law, to say anything they think might be useful to their man—or, in the case of Ms. Moseley Braun, woman—without any rebuke from the bench, which is to say the media, for wasting the court's time with absurd, speculative, or tendentious pleading.

Instead, the media are happy to join in with such pleading by giving a ready forum to anyone this side of Lyndon LaRouche who is prepared to say anything colorfully insulting about the opposition, the more provocative the better. Even LaRouche finds his money as good as any other candidate's for paid advertisements. In the American marketplace of ideas, lunacy is a commodity like any other. Those, like the poor enthusiasts of the LaRouche youth

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movement, whose meager intellectual purse doesn't run to complex economic, diplomatic, and legislative arguments, may still want to purchase a cheap, shoddily constructed conspiracy theory or two to see them through an election year. And, after all, how much different is LaRouche's contention that, under Bush, the nation is "bankrupt, depleted, ruined" from the more up-market Dick Gephardt's repeated insistence that the president's tenure has been "a miserable failure"? The one is about as plausible as the other.

True, the radio and television stations who accept LaRouche's advertisements must know that he is crazy. But who, they may ask, are they to set themselves up in the place of proper mental health professionals—especially when there is money to be made? Anyway, running LaRouche ads is in essence no different from the news shows that haul out deliberately provocative commentators. Indeed, the voices belonging to such ornaments of our national intellectual life as the novelist and belle-lettrist Gore Vidal, the linguist-philosopher Noam Chomsky, the film maker and best-selling author Michael Moore, the comedian and best-selling author Al Franken, the actress Janeane Garofalo, and the spy novelist John LeCarré are scarcely to be distinguished from LaRouche's—in substance if not in style. Mr. Vidal and Mr. Chomsky suggest that the Bush administration is itself implicated in the terror-attacks of September 11, while Mr. Moore believes that it knows where Osama bin Laden is hiding but chooses not to capture him in order to stoke war-fever.

There was a minor kerfuffle recently when MoveOn.org, a website lavishly supported by Mr. Soros, ran a contest for anti-Bush ads and got two which compared President Bush to Adolf Hitler. One claimed that "1945's war crimes" were "2003's foreign policy." But the attention these ads attracted seemed mainly owing to the fact that the site's managers were somewhat embarrassed by them and took them down. Elsewhere on the left, such language was unremarkable and pretty much unremarked except by those who sought it out and presumably agreed with it. Vidal, for instance, said in an interview that the Patriot Act was "as despotic as anything Hitler came up with." He goes on to say, like LaRouche again, that Bush has "wrecked the economy" from sheer stupidity and will certainly be swept from office in November unless his henchmen are successful in what is sure to be an attempt—or another attempt—to steal the election.

With such lurid fantasies of deep-laid plots by those in power to subvert American democracy hovering just off-stage during the election campaign of 2004, the candidates need to make little effort themselves to associate themselves with such dark imaginings. Howard Dean, the Democratic front-runner for the presidential nomination as I write, said that the Vidal–Chomsky hypothesis about Bush's involvement in 9/11 was "an interesting theory," even as he disclaimed belief in it. Senator Bob Graham, before he dropped out of the race, went even further in claiming that Bush, though perhaps not a witting accomplice of the hijackers, was criminally culpable in their success, while General Wesley Clark claims that the president, whom he calls "a reckless, radical, heartless leader," must accept the blame because he "didn't do his duty" to prevent the terror attacks. John Kerry, meanwhile, keeps insisting that he only voted to authorize the use of force in Iraq because he was deliberately deceived and lied to by the administration.

There are plans for Showtime to run a reality-TV version of the election next summer, but real reality has already overtaken TV reality. Already the *echt* candidates are behaving like the contestants on *American Idol* or amateur night at the improv and hoping that their song or routine will be the one chosen as nearest resembling that of the real thing. One of them may eventually come up with an election-winner like Bill Clinton's description in 1992 of the mildest of the post-war recessions as "the worst economy in the last 50"—or was it 60?—

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"years." One of the consequences of this free-for-all in which no assertion is too outlandish to be paraded in front of a mass audience in hopes of its approval is that those who really are trying to understand the matters at issue suffer a disastrous loss of self-confidence in their ability to do so. Writing in the London *Daily Telegraph*, the columnist Barbara Amiel made a shrewd point about the obscurity of the scientific language in which policy matters such as the Kyoto Protocol are couched—so that "it is no wonder that most people judge the value of Kyoto not on its merits but according to their feelings about George Bush."

Yet the same could be said about almost every other matter of national and international concern. What about the Bush-sponsored prescription drug benefit, which extended federal entitlements to the elderly well beyond the point which many in both parties thought fiscally prudent? Yet at a Howard Dean fundraiser in New York, Miss Garofalo called it the "you-can-go-f***-yourself-Grandma bill." Huh? Oh right. She just means that she hates Bush. But isn't it odd that she attempts to justify her hatred by saying that his pushing for the biggest entitlement program for the elderly since Medicare amounts to you-can-go-engage-in-sexual-intercourse-with-yourself-Grandma? It might have made some sense if she had said it was the you-can-go-etc.-*Junior* bill. But she is no more interested in real political argument than her audience. She knows that her fellow Bush-haters are not looking for reason, just more Bush hatred. Hence, too, the paucity of voices among even the most respectable Democratic candidates raised against the Hitler comparisons of MoveOn.org and others.

If it were just a few empty-headed celebrities who were reciting the anti-Bush litany of complaint it would hardly signify, but now that the custom of the country is that anyone can say anything about an opponent, political discourse has been drained of any real content. No thinking person expects any presidential candidate of either party to say anything worth listening to: everything has been carefully scripted and managed and calculated by some handler or speech-writer who has focus-group tested it on morons. The signs are instantly discernible. When Senator Joe Lieberman went on the "This Week" show with George Stephanopoulos and mentioned the words "extreme" and "extremism" and "extremism in both parties" repeatedly, you knew that some spin-doctor had figured out that ostentious centrism, regardless of any specific measure to be centrist about, was a good niche for him—even if it wasn't a good enough niche to win him any Democratic primaries.

In Errol Morris's recent documentary about Robert McNamara, *The Fog of War*, the former secretary of defense in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, now eighty-seven, says that during his time in government he "learned that you never answer the question that has been asked of you; answer the question that you wish had been asked of you." Whether he knows it or not, that has been the standard advice of those who administer "media-training" to public men for a generation. But now we seem to be seeing the revenge of the questioners, since interviewers of and commentators on these "media-savvy" public figures don't pay any attention to what *they* say either. Or so I infer from an interview with Senator Kerry on "Meet the Press" in January. Attacking the Republicans with a frequently used but dubious instance of their viciousness during a recent senatorial election campaign against the Democratic incumbent in Georgia, a wheelchair-bound veteran, Kerry said: "We saw what they did to challenge the patriotism of Max Cleland, a triple amputee, a man who left three of his limbs on the ground in Vietnam. They challenged his patriotism. His regret is he didn't stand up and fight back."

Well, I guess it was! Imagine the fuss that would have been made of such a remark if the President had made it, or poor old Dan

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Quayle, hounded out of public life by the media for misspelling "potato." Likewise, the media looked with indulgence on Hillary Rodham Clinton's attempt at a joke when she identified the late Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi (d. 1948) as the proprietor of a service station in St. Louis. One is inclined to detect just the hint of bias. Yet there may be another explanation for the fact that Kerry's interviewer, Tim Russert, didn't bat an eyelash. He wasn't listening. And why should he? Kerry wasn't listening to him either.

Employing what *The Washington Post* the same day described as "his merciless journalistic skills to pick apart the policy statements of the Democratic presidential candidates," Russert had also attempted to point out to Kerry the contradiction between his saying that Bush's occupation of Iraq was "creating more terrorists" and his criticism of Howard Dean as not having "the judgment to be President" for saying that America was no safer for the capture of Saddam Hussein. "But, Senator," said Russert, "you can just hear the Republicans saying, 'John Kerry said if he was president, we would not be in Iraq, and that there are now more terrorists in Iraq, despite the capture of Saddam Hussein. Therefore, John Kerry does not have the judgment or the credibility to be elected president.' You can hear the Republican commercials."

To this Kerry replied: "Tim, this debate —no, because if you look at what I said, in the fullness of that interview, Tim, as well as in every other interview that I've ever had, I have said we have to hold Saddam Hussein accountable, but I've also said we have to do it in a way that is smart and legitimate." Russert must have thought that such a laughably feeble answer—what on earth did the Senator mean by holding the ex-dictator "accountable" if it precluded making war on him?—settled the matter. Or else he was not listening. The previous week on the show, he had interviewed General Clark, who blandly asserted that, had he been president, he would have caught and captured Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. An easy thing for him to assert, you might think. And yet, once again, Russert had no riposte to a weak answer to his question: "How are you so sure you could have done that?" Clark's rambling reply ran, in part:

> what I would have done before I started the operation in Afghanistan is look for a success strategy. After you've had experience with military planning and the way political military actions operate, you know that you have to start at the back end and work forward. So it's: What are the conditions you want to have achieved when the operation's over? What I would have said is, "We want to take the Taliban out of power and we want to bag Osama bin Laden and the top leadership in al-Qaeda." And then I would have directed the military to plan for that result and work backwards to when do you start the operation, how do you open the operation, and so forth. I don't think that was done in this case.

In response to this meaningless farrago, Russert's "merciless journalistic skills" were silent thereafter.

But of course he was only playing by the new rule that anyone can say anything—or at least anyone can say anything by way of criticism of the Bush administration. Paradoxically, this has meant that the administration has had a free ride among those who are otherwise broadly sympathetic to Bush on subjects—like the enormous new entitlement for the elderly and the seemingly unrestrained federal spending of which it was only a part—where otherwise he might have received serious criticism. The Republicans were circling the wagons in the same way that the Democrats did when as virulent a hatred of Bill Clinton was fashionable in some conservative and Republican circles. But that's the way political debate will be carried on so long as each side is allowed to treat as legitimate a view of the other as beast-men.

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Books

The mystery of Marianne Moore

by William Logan

What most readers remember of Marianne Moore are her beasts—her jerboa, her ostrich, her pangolin. Late in her life, when the brilliant strangeness of her early poems had receded into the mists, she became a fabulous beast herself, poetry's most endearing mascot. In her tricorn hat she looked as if she'd just emerged from a meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution; and her befuddled, otherworldly air suggested that poets were absentminded nocturnal creatures, unused to daylight. Her antics made poets, and poetry, seem slightly ridiculous—she threw out the first ball at a Yankees game and met that poet of the ring, Cassius Clay (soon to be known as Muhammad Ali). The Ford Motor Company asked her to help name a new car, then apologetically, and with great delicacy, rejected her bizarre suggestions: the Intelligent Whale, the Arcenciel, the Mongoose Civique, the Pastelogram, the Turcotingo, and, surely the weirdest and most delightful, the Utopian Turtletop. The company eventually decided to call this disaster of design the Edsel.

Of all the modernists, the poets who invented the American poetry of the twentieth century and in whose haberdashery we still write, Moore has been least well served by her editors, of which she was the most tyrannical. We have sturdy editions of Frost, Stevens, Williams, and the early poems of Pound, if mostly mediocre ones of Eliot. For Moore, readers have long relied on the serial acts of butchery she committed in *The Complete Poems* (1967), whose author's note reads, in its entirety, "Omissions are not accidents." This volume could have been titled *Half the Complete Poems* with some justice.

Moore was an intrepid and reckless reviser of her work (one who preferred the ax to the scalpel), taking poems cast into delicate stanzas, among the most beautiful syllabic verse ever written, hacking out lines here and there or crushing their fine crystalline structures into a squarish mass closer to prose, then printing the mutilated version without apology. Her poem "Poetry" went through a bewildering number of amputations and grafts and amputations again, until in the end it was just three lines long:

> I, too, dislike it.
> Reading it, however, with a perfect
> contempt for it, one discovers in
> it, after all, a place for the genuine.

Perhaps, after their poems are published, poets should not be allowed within a country mile of them.

Poetry of obscure genius is often the embodiment, not the rejection, of the poet's origins. Moore's mother abandoned her husband before Marianne was born—he had gone mad after losing his money trying to build a smokeless furnace. The omnipresent mother, not the absent father, was the condition of Moore's eccentric growth (Sylvia Plath's mother was similarly smoth-

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ering after her husband's death). The Moore household, with its family newspaper, written mostly by Marianne, its cutesy puns and tedious pet names and private jokes, fostered a childhood that lasted most of her life (her mother died still living with Marianne, who by then was sixty). The Moores were the Brontes of the Philadelphia suburbs.

The Poems of Marianne Moore begins with a long section of juvenilia, work not of adolescence but of her college years and after.[1] Even into her mid-twenties, Moore's poems breathed the fire-smoke of antiquity, living in romantic tales illustrated by N. C. Wyeth—their Christabel-like aura of the supernatural might have roused Coleridge to seduce her ("Her eye is dark, her vestment rich,/ Embroidered with a silver stitch,/ A lady or a tiger lily,/ Slave, come tell me which?"). The coy, teasing rhymes have the faux innocence of chorus girls and seem to anticipate Edna St. Vincent Millay's titillating sensuality.

> Devices as slender as pennons float
> Up high in the air and sink down; the moat
> Encases her head like a casque;
> Her light
> Sorties, like highlights on a flash,
> Requite
> Men with torrents of toads from lips of lead
> And then grind up her bones to make their
> bread.

After a while, however, you realize there's nothing behind the fairy-tale innocence but more innocence—these are poems of a life queerly sheltered, and the armor it forged couldn't be penetrated even by an education at Bryn Mawr.

In these dreadful verses, the techniques of Moore's later poetry gradually, almost shyly, accumulate—the long and peculiar titles; the titles that serve as the first line of the poem; the shaped syllabic stanzas; the presumptive use of "we" (the shyer the I, the bolder the we); the quotations from her eclectic reading; and soon, everywhere, her animals, especially unlovely ones like toads, jellyfish, grasshoppers. (There are no points for seeing the psychology here.) She was a poet who reveled in her oddities, who created a self that courted rejection—convention cannot wound what has first rejected itself. That might be the porcupine's philosophy.

It's surprising, even so, to find the manner and technique, the particular quizzical tone of her best poems (like that of a great-aunt's great-aunt), highly developed before the poems are any good. For all their bristling, her poems are lonely and born of loneliness. They have the shorthand obscurity of private arguments, and after a while don't seem to care how unpoetic they are. In the years after Bryn Mawr, when Moore was living at home and teaching at the Carlisle Indian School (she called her students "sluggards and gnats," according to her biographer Charles Molesworth), her poems are sometimes marginal quarrels with the books she read: reading compensated for isolation.

Moore found the poetry lying asleep within prose, in manuals and monographs, advertisements and government reports, even in Tolstoy's antipoetic "business documents and// school-books." Sometimes she ended up sounding like a college lecturer ("In these non-committal, personal-impersonal expressions of appearance,/ the eye knows what to skip;/ the physiognomy of conduct . . . "); but in the next poem, or the one after, she would escape from what she called "the supertadpoles of expression" and discover real tadpoles again. The moderns did not refuse the possibilities of prose or of sources foreign to poetry: Moore was fortunate to come to the attention of magazines like *Poetry* and the *Dial*, and poets like Pound and Eliot, when what constituted a poem was an open question.

To address a poem to a prize bird is one thing, to address one to a steamroller quite

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1 *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, by Marianne Moore, edited by Grace Schulman; Viking Press, 449 pages, $40.

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another. Moore's fancies took metaphysical flight (sometimes she seems like a metaphysical poet gone rogue); but her poems bore her whimsy by returning to abstract questions of aesthetics and identity, by squeezing the romance out of romantic forms without losing her puckish or even slightly sarcastic character—Moore got a lot of service out of *not*. The syllabic structures into which her poems increasingly fell allowed her to imprison this romance of prose in a form whose tensions were poetic:

> There is a great amount of poetry in
> unconscious
> fastidiousness. Certain Ming
> products, imperial floor-coverings of coach-
> wheel yellow, are well enough in their way
> but I have seen something
> that I like better—a
> mere childish attempt to make an
> imperfectly ballasted animal stand up.

The Ming goods are the merest distracting byway in a poem about the behavior of swans and ants. That was the charm of Moore's mature poetry—she could start almost anywhere, could make a medieval emblem of a steamroller, and by diverse paths (almost a drunk man's walk at times) sidle toward, or at least rub the poem's fur against, a more profound abstract question. If the comic twinkle was part of her manner, so was the schoolmarmish gravity—she could be both beautifully obtuse and winsomely naive. Her ingenious descriptions, her intimacy with a world seen, if rarely felt, were kept in restraint by these larger questions, even as the prose in her lines was checked by the syllabic count and usually knitted by rhyme as well.

Sometimes you shake your head in bewilderment, wondering if such odd things can really be poems (just as scientists at first shook their heads over the platypus and declared it couldn't exist). Such a manner, absorbing microscopic observation of nature (how Dürer would have loved her—or Leeuwenhoek) as well as snippets from the daily paper, could confront almost any subject—and yet some poems almost identical in form to her strange masterpieces are the most awful failures. "I do these/ things which I do," she says, "which please/ no one but myself." That is as true as most of her generalizations, but it doesn't explain why some privacies mean so much more than others.

There's no direct source for Moore's infinitely refined syllabic verse (it has the purity of trigonometry), and she thought so little of it that when revising she sometimes jettisoned what must have seemed merely superstructure. "Syllabics? Oh, I repudiate that," Moore once said to the editor. English poets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had written verse by counting just the syllables (the French have always done so, the way insomniacs count sheep), and Robert Bridges and others tried, with scant success, to revive the practice. Moore's patterned stanzas seem homegrown, something cranky and backyard, perhaps at first accidental. The syllabics appear shortly after her graduation from Bryn Mawr; possibly she was drawn to them—to spend much time adjusting and perfecting them—because they advertised her rhymes.

The pleasure of Moore's eye lies in the way it troubles what we've seen, or ought to have seen. Her "observations" are mock-precise readings, as well as a moral record.

> *The Fish*
>
> wade
> through black jade.
> Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps
> adjusting the ash heaps;
> opening and shutting itself like
>
> an
> injured fan.

The metaphors, so beautifully Aristotelian, came naturally to her. You see the same habits of observation in Moore's letters—

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she once wrote her brother about crowned cranes she had seen, "slate blue with a pompom of centipede's legs on their heads about the size of a silk pompom on a slipper." Elizabeth Bishop, with a fanfare Barnum would have envied, called her The World's Greatest Living Observer. Things in the net of her descriptions were not caught, but released.

Many of Moore's best poems came in the years before and immediately after her most remarkable book, *Observations* (1924), the first book in which she chose the poems herself. (Her earlier book, *Poems* [1921], had been prepared and printed in secret by friends, who then mailed it to the somewhat shocked poet.) Moore's poetry dried up during the years, from 1925 to 1929, when she worked for and then edited the *Dial*, the most important literary magazine of the Twenties. Though she suffered a dry spell again in the late Thirties, her poems grew bolder and more complicated, often cast into sequences whose richness has not always been appreciated. Yet the poems had already started to turn fussy, hardening into manner, eventually becoming almost parodies of the lightness and daring of her best work. Those Byzantine stone traceries she called stanzas, with their languorous banner-like sentences (not a lower form of poetry but a higher form of prose), could suddenly seem mere papier-mâché.

Moore was such a remarkable beast (like her poems she lay outside the common taxonomies), it was difficult for readers to decide what to make of her. She was long disliked for the wrong reasons (mainly, that her poems were peacockish, opaque, and not "poetic" enough). In the special issue the *Quarterly Review of Literature* devoted to her in 1948, serious critics and poets (Bishop, Ransom, Stevens, and Williams among them) grasp at her like blind sages surrounding an elephant. One caresses the trunk, one grabs the tail, and each comes away with his own impression. She is said to be indebted to Thomas Browne, then Poe, then Hopkins—at the end, the poor, quizzical reader is no better off than when he started, except in knowing that even the professionals found Moore difficult to get hold of.

Moore's poems often seem, in their crabbed insufficiencies, matters not seized but avoided or fended off, not admissions of what she can do but confessions of all she can't. Randall Jarrell was taken with a line I love: "The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;/ not in silence, but restraint." It has a hard truth and then, after a hesitation, a deeper truth—Moore never relinquished her modesty or her mildness, even when saying the most devastating things (William Carlos Williams once claimed he was "in perfect terror" of her). And yet, with their affectless delivery (like that of a junior assistant file clerk), you get the slightly melancholy feeling, as you do with Larkin, that life was occurring elsewhere.

The later books, when she had become a public monument to Eccentricity, were sometimes rapturously reviewed despite poems that were an insult to her earlier work. She wrote some of the worst flag-waving poems of World War II ("With set jaw they are fighting,/ fighting, fighting"), and became longwinded and tiresome, as if delivering an Armistice Day address she'd found on the back of a soup can. She seems to have swallowed certain naive, sentimental notions about America: when she refers to the president as "our/ hardest-working citizen," the reader can only splutter. She was speaking of that golfer, President Eisenhower.

Her animals, those refugees from medieval bestiaries and emblem books, once offered her access to an ethical world; later they seemed merely the point, or beside the point—her tone came to lie somewhere between that of Queen Victoria and the girl who sat on a tuffet. You think the nadir has been reached in a poem about the Brooklyn Dodgers; but, no, there are worse to come: a poem commemorating the rescue of Carnegie Hall; a paean to the actor Yul Brynner, special consultant to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ("equipped for a crazy twelve-month tramp/

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[a plod], he flew among/ the damned, found each camp"); a poem to a mechanical crow, in what pretends to be Esperanto (it's a joke, but not a good joke). By the time she writes a second poem about the Dodgers, you lower your head in embarrassment and say, "Oh, Miss Moore!" A P.R. flack for good causes, she has forgotten that supreme good cause, her poetry.

Even at the end, you see in her poems traces of her beautiful stubbornness (the deeper you went in her, the more likely you were to strike iron). You can love her for her maze of syntax alone, for the abstractions she turns on and off like a light switch, for descriptions out of Ovid's metamorphoses (Moore's embody the wish to be transformed), for logic that leaps about, in the way of her jerboa, "like the uneven notes/ of the Bedouin flute." You can love her for all these things, because there's something winning about a poet who makes poems out of magazine cuttings and horsehide glue—to the last she remained an outsider. Beyond her conundrums and lists (she could have built a world out of lists), her armored animals and sometimes armored people, beyond the essential absurdity of her art, lie the plain fictions and devious facts of her most original poems: "To a Steam Roller," "The Fish," "Poetry," "Marriage" (a subject about which she knew nothing, and everything), "An Octopus," "The Steeple-Jack," "No Swan So Fine," "Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle," "The Pangolin," "The Paper Nautilus," "He 'Digesteth Harde Yron,'" "Spenser's Ireland," "His Shield," and many another. Whatever other poets have done, they have done nothing like Marianne Moore. Her virtue is not only that she is peculiar, but that she is ours.

Grace Schulman's new edition tries to return to the reader all of Moore's poems chronologically, including college verse that for the last century has gathered dust in the archives and poems Moore long ago banished. Schulman was a friend of Moore's, only fourteen when she first met the poet; but this has given her no special insight into choosing texts for what will for some time be the standard edition. Indeed, it's at first difficult, from the editor's diffuse and rambling introduction, to discover how she chose as she did.

Moore's revisions will always vex and harry a conscientious editor, because there are so many to choose from. Each new publication gave the poet a chance to tinker; and sometimes she ignored one version to return to an older one, like an indecisive lover. It's tedious to read multiple versions of the same poem—textual instability is the abyss into which most readers refuse to stare. Schulman retains much of Moore's *Complete Poems* (1967, revised 1981), which represents her final wishes (though you have little confidence in those wishes when you learn that during the Sixties Moore "suffered from aphasia after multiple strokes"). The editor, in her carefree way, here and there uses, she says, "versions that I liked from earlier editions and/or literary journals," a method described as "conscientious inconsistency." I would call it whim.

Beginning the book with the juvenilia has one good effect and several bad ones. It's a revelation to see the poems laid out as Moore's imagination discovered them, to read the awful productions of this naive and unlikely poet as she makes her way, unsteadily, up the slopes—it's like reading the listless early poems of Keats, only to be stunned by the brilliance of "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Yet not only do Moore's poems now begin with a large mass of indifferent, often childish poetry through which the reader has to struggle, but the poet's progress is illusory. The promised chronological order is nothing of the sort—the last two-thirds of the juvenilia is printed, with few exceptions, alphabetically by title, a fact the editor has chosen not to mention.

The book is somewhat bedeviled by errors. "Lizards" has been thinned to "lizard" in one poem; an extra word wanders into the last stanza of "Those Various Scalpels";

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and "Critics and Connoisseurs" is afflicted with an errant stanza break, faulty indentations, and stanzas that seem to forget they're meant to be eight lines, not nine. Moore's oddball notes were part of her charm (some readers have liked them almost better than the poems), but the notes in this new edition are a sorry jumble. The editor first reprints a somewhat ratty selection of Moore's own, but not always those meant for the versions of the poems here—and not in the same order as the poems have now been printed. Schulman's notes follow in a separate section and often helpfully reproduce earlier or later versions of a poem, some of them dragged from drafts; otherwise they record little beyond where the poems were first published and which version the editor selected. Worse, neither set of notes is keyed to page numbers—you have to be a bloodhound to match the notes to poems.

It would have been far more useful to integrate Moore's notes with the editor's and to provide basic annotation. If you want to know who Kay Nielson or Will Honeycomb was, or whether "Coral-and-Brown" was a woman's outfit, or what Excello might have been, you're on your own. If you simply must find out how Elston Howard was robbed of the batting title, or why the second stanzas of two different poems are almost line-for-line the same, good luck. Because they're so often based on stray news items and quirky facts, Moore's poems are richer after scholars have had their way with them (no one has yet found where she borrowed the phrase "imaginary gardens with real toads in them"). Explication sometimes tells us no more than what everyone at the time would have known. It's a pity the editor did not accept this as her task, or her duty.

Many of Moore's early poems are also available in the brilliantly edited *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907–1924*,[2] a lavishly produced photo-facsimile of *Observations,* followed by facsimiles of the poems' first appearance in magazines. Robin Schulze, the editor, exemplifies what Moore called *conscious* fastidiousness. Each poem is accompanied by a long note on its first publication (or, as Schulze solemnly calls it, first "presentation"), its relation to subsequent ones, and a table of variants for the early versions. (She might have expended a few lines on the poems' later histories.)

Schulze has written an entertaining essay on each of the little magazines in which Moore appeared, and includes facsimiles of poems Moore published in magazines but didn't collect in *Observations,* though this ignores dozens of poems Grace Schulman has rescued from the archives. Readers will need both volumes for the panoptic, or stereoscopic, view (to confound matters, Schulze includes a poem Schulman overlooks). *The Early Poems* is beautifully laid out, thoroughly illustrated, lushly printed, a tribute to the editor's art and the book designer's craft. The whole would be a sterling example of bookmaking if it hadn't been glued together with what seems to be library paste—halfway through, it began to fall apart in my hands.

Schulze's introduction, at times unfortunately marred by academic cant, reviews some recent scholarly quarrels over editing—over how, in essence, to regard an author's revisions. Variants are the rage: rather than choose one state of a work (representing the author's final intentions, say), editors love multiple versions. Readers are now often given, for example, both the quarto and folio texts of *Hamlet*, rather than an eclectic version uniting them. There's something to be said for this method, when a poet changes his mind as often and as radically as Moore; but, though it is good for editors, it is hell for readers, whose interest in poetry may have worn out long before the sixth or seventh variant text of "Poetry." One school of editing, for which

2 *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907–1924*, by Marianne Moore, edited by Robin G. Schulze; University of California Press, 506 pages, $50.

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Schulze has some sympathy, stresses the contribution to meaning of the book's original design, layout, and typeface. Schulze fails to see that this makes a fetish of things not only beyond the author's control, but also far more transparent to a contemporary reader. Design is almost invisible at first, but readers a century after must often read through the design to get to the words (a photo-facsimile is itself a gesture of romantic antiquarianism, exalting even typographical errors). Once in a while, scholars might ask poets what they think.

Schulze has chosen for her facsimile the first edition of *Observations*, largely on the specious grounds that Moore was awarded the *Dial* prize for it and became known because of it. The editor has been at pains to point out, however, that the proprietors of the *Dial* were eager to publish Moore's book mainly to take advantage of the prize they were about to award her. Moore rushed the manuscript into readiness in less than a month. A few months after the first printing, when a second was called for, she revised the poems thoroughly. Surely this more considered edition should have been used. The revisions, with one exception, go unmentioned and are not even included among the variora. It seems as if the idea of taste has been locked out at the front door only to sneak in the back.

One must be grateful, nevertheless, to a scholar who so obviously loves the work she has labored over. She hasn't annotated the poems, but her thoroughness elsewhere recommends her for the job. It's a mark of a great poet that, no matter how the age changes, his poems, or hers, will still attract such adoration even from scholars, those famously dried-up souls. For all her armor, Marianne Moore could never protect herself against the admiration of her readers. She was an Emersonian original, who unlike Whitman and Dickinson let her terra incognita lie uncharted within herself—she made her American bed and then, for half a century, lay in it in her prim American way.

More than natural grace

Frederick Law Olmsted
Walks and Talks of an
American Farmer in England.
Library of American Landscape History,
530 pages, $24.95 (paper)

reviewed by Francis Morrone

In 2003, New York City celebrated the "sesquicentennial" of Central Park. I put that word in quotes because this was a dubious municipal anniversary. 1853 was the year in which the city council of New York authorized the purchase of 778 acres of land, bounded by Fifth and Eighth Avenues and Fifty-ninth and One-hundred-sixth Streets, for the creation of a great metropolitan park. (The city later augmented this with an additional sixty-five acres, extending the Park to One-hundred-tenth Street.) In fact, Calvert Vaux's and Frederick Law Olmsted's "Greensward" plan for the Park dates from 1858, which was also the year in which the plan began to be implemented. Therefore, 2008 will be the Park's true sesquicentennial. No matter, I suppose. New York City was in the mood to celebrate something.

Amid the celebrations, we saw all manner of exhibitions, walking tours, articles, lectures, and books about the Park. Among the most fascinating of these is an absolutely gorgeous facsimile reprint, courtesy of the Library of American Landscape History in Amherst, Massachusetts, of Frederick Law Olmsted's 1852 book *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*. The reprint features a superb introduction and scholarly annotations by Charles C. McLaughlin, professor emeritus of history at American University and the founding editor of *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*. The publisher put great care into making the reprint affordable as well as attractive. It is hard to think that a $24.95 paperback could be handsomer than this volume.

Most people refer to "Olmsted's Central Park" and "Olmsted's Prospect Park." Among historians of American landscape architec-

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ture, a war rages between those who believe Calvert Vaux has the true claim on these parks' authorship, and those who promote Olmsted. For many years, the Olmsted forces prevailed. Indeed, an Olmsted industry emerged—a National Historic Site (in Brookline, Massachusetts), long-term scholarly publication of the great man's miscellaneous papers, fat biographies, and such. None of this is other than it should be. After all, Olmsted ran the most successful landscape architecture practice in the world, and designed, or helped to design, parks all across the nation, parks without which the civic life of Americans is unimaginable. In addition, he spawned a landscape architecture dynasty: his son and stepson were also America's foremost landscape designers. For example, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (known as "Rick") laid out the magnificent suburban development of Forest Hills Gardens, in Queens, New York.

Yet, in recent years we have seen a bit of an Olmsted backlash among those who put forward the idea that Vaux should be credited as the principal designer of his joint ventures with Olmsted. In New York, the gardening writer and parks advocate M. M. Graff published *Central Park–Prospect Park: A New Perspective* in 1985. Ms. Graff's lively style and strong judgments make this a compulsively readable book, in which we learn that "Olmsted couldn't draw," "Olmsted was a dismal writer," and that he knew nothing about plants. Olmsted's titular precedence over Vaux in their partnership "was the first step in the public undervaluation of Vaux's role that broke his spirit and brought him at last to the water of Gravesend Bay"—a reference to Vaux's possible suicide. She quotes the great landscape architect Samuel Parsons, Jr.: "Mr. Olmsted was a leader of men, a man of magnetism and charm, a literary genius, but hardly the creative artist that Mr. Vaux was."

Just as emphatic as Graff is the architectural historian George B. Tatum, who claims that without Vaux, "Olmsted would be remembered—when he was remembered at all—as a journalist and author."

Lately, we see an anti-anti-Olmsted backlash. In 1999, Witold Rybczynski came out with *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century*, a decidedly pro-Olmsted book. And now, with the reprint of Olmsted's 1852 book, we have another pro-Olmsted salvo, as shown by Mr. McLaughlin's mentioning Calvert Vaux only once in the book's lengthy introduction and extensive annotations.

But why would Mr. McLaughlin mention Vaux any more than this? After all, *Walks and Talks* predates Olmsted's partnership with Vaux. Well, I see a couple of reasons for Vaux's entering into the story. First, we have the remarkable—the amazing—coincidence that while Olmsted and his friends ambled and rambled about the English countryside, Olmsted's hero, the Newburgh, New York-based landscape gardener Andrew Jackson Downing, visited London to find a sympathetic architect whom he might lure to America as an assistant. The young London architect whom Downing fetched was, of course, Calvert Bowyer Vaux. Second, Vaux became interested in Olmsted after reading *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*.

As well Vaux might. For, though the book is, to say the least, uneven, it nonetheless manifests a lively intelligence, a probing eye, and occasional glimmers of magnificence, as to make any, like Vaux, who got involved in America's nascent public-parks movement wish to have on his side the author of this book.

In the spring of 1850, Olmsted, twenty-eight years old, embarked, with his brother John and their friend Charles Loring Brace (later famous as a social reformer and founder of the Children's Aid Society), on a twenty-six-day crossing, from New York to Liverpool, aboard the 1500-ton packet ship Henry Clay. (In another remarkable coincidence, two years later the great Downing died in the wreck of a Hudson steamer also named the Henry Clay.) The young men's purpose was to hike across the countryside of southern England. They were not the

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first, nor the last, to be awed by the glistening beauty of the verdant farms and vales of a land shaped by the hand of man in concert with nature into what, many years later, the architect Christopher Alexander called "one of humanity's most beautiful artifacts, intricate and refined, historically deep, an aesthetic whole."

Olmsted had led a varied, indeed a desultory, life until this trip. The product of a cultivated Hartford, Connecticut family, he, a student of modest attainments, failed to precede his younger brother to Yale. Instead, Fred (as he was called) became a merchant seaman, and went to China. His father then bought Fred a farm on Staten Island where he might indulge his deepening interest in "scientific farming." His interest in the English countryside had much to do with his desire to make his farm both efficient and beautiful. Thus far, Olmsted's was an unprepossessing career, and one could scarcely have foreseen his later renown.

Upon returning from England, his Staten Island neighbor, a publisher named George Putnam, encouraged Olmsted to shape his travel journals into a book. Putnam issued *Walks and Talks* in two volumes in 1852. The book earned generally respectful notices, but otherwise did not set the world ablaze. Still, it propelled Olmsted's career well in the direction of his future glory. In Mr. McLaughlin's words,

> it is a record of how England permeated every aspect of Olmsted's worldview a few years before he translated it into his career as scientific farmer, author and publisher, brilliant administrator, and, finally, landscape architect of twenty major parks and park systems in cities from New York to California. In these designs, Olmsted kept in mind the landscapes, both natural and manmade, that he had seen during his 1850 tour, and very consciously adapted the best, most felicitous features of them to his commissions. In effect, Olmsted remolded portions of the American landscape into idealized versions of the beautiful countryside of Victorian England.

On the strength of this book, the *New-York Daily Times* commissioned Olmsted to travel in the slave states and write down his impressions. Olmsted's *Times* dispatches in 1853–1854 formed three books published between 1854 and 1860, then issued together as *The Cotton Kingdom* in 1861. His other major journalistic foray came in 1855–1857 when, again with his indulgent father's assistance, Olmsted became a part-owner and managing editor of the prestigious *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*.

Olmsted and his companions toured Liverpool, then the world's busiest seaport, before setting off for the countryside. Liverpool shared with America, and most other cities of the time, the filth, the noise, the stench, the overcrowding, and the soul-deadening routine that caused sensitive observers, like Olmsted, to dread the industrial metropolis of the nineteenth century. Yet Olmsted saw something else in Liverpool. The recently opened Birkenhead Park fired his imagination. Situated across the Mersey from Liverpool, Birkenhead was the first publicly funded park in England. Designed by Joseph Paxton (the brilliant designer later famous for his Crystal Palace), it opened in 1847. Today, Britain's official literature on Birkenhead hails it as a major influence on New York's Central Park—as indeed it was. Olmsted wrote:

> Five minutes of admiration, and a few more spent studying the manner in which art had been employed to obtain from nature so much beauty, and I was ready to admit that in democratic America there was nothing to be thought of as comparable with this People's Garden. Indeed, gardening had here reached a perfection that I had never before dreamed of. I cannot undertake to describe the effect of so much taste and skill as had evidently been employed; I will only tell you, that we passed by winding paths, over acres and acres, with a constant varying surface, where on all sides were growing every variety of shrubs and flowers, with more than natural grace, all set in borders of greenest, closest turf, and all kept with most consummate neatness.

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I like that "more than natural grace," for the hallmark of Central Park and Prospect Park, as of Paxton's Birkenhead, is the artful manner in which the Park provides a panoply of naturalistic effects in a way nature herself, unmediated by man, could ever do.

The pro-Olmstedians adduce from passages like this the notion that Olmsted entered into his partnership with Vaux with already clearly defined ideas of how Central Park should look. But as Ms. Graff writes, "The question of the precise role of each man is the subject of endless partisan argument, no less heated for being essentially unsolvable." Indeed, Vaux himself, independently of Olmsted, also thrilled to Paxton's park designs—especially the Halifax Park in West Yorkshire. Vaux worked for Downing when the latter's magazine, *The Horticulturist*, printed Olmsted's essay, later to be incorporated in *Walks and Talks*, on Birkenhead. That may have been Vaux's first real sense of Olmsted, upon whom Vaux called in 1858 as he prepared his design for Central Park.

Though the anti-Olmstedian Ms. Graff says Olmsted was a bad writer, even she admits that "In justice, it should be noted that Olmsted's early books and some of his personal letters, especially when animated by strong feeling, contain lively descriptions and felicitous phrases." I think this gets it about right. *Walks and Talks* is a hard book to read from cover to cover. Olmsted lacks a sense of proportion, and his writing falls prey to that Victorian affliction I call the jumpy comma, making it hard for the modern reader to get in sync with the rhythm of Olmsted's sentences. At times, though, the writing evokes the majesty of the period's best writer, John Ruskin. For on occasion we reach such a passage as this:

> There we were right in the midst of it! The country—and such a country!—green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous! We stood dumb-stricken by its loveliness, as, from the bleak April and bare boughs we had left home, broke upon us that English May—sunny, leafy, blooming May—in an English lane; with hedges, English hedges, hawthorn hedges, all in blossom; homely old farm-houses, quaint stables, and haystacks; the old church spire over the distant trees; the mild sun beaming through the watery atmosphere, and all so quiet—the only sounds the hum of bees and the crisp grass-tearing of a silken-skinned, real (unimported) Hereford cow over the hedge. No longer excited by daring to think we should see it, as we discussed the scheme round the old home-fire; no longer cheering ourselves with it in the stupid, tedious ship; no more forgetful of it in the bewilderment of the busy town—but there we were, right in the midst of it; long time silent, and then speaking softly, as if it were enchantment indeed, we gazed upon it and breathed it—never to be forgotten.

One paragraph, so beautiful, itself so green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous, as to make the reader spend his savings to go right over.

Pro-Olmsted or anti-Olmsted, how wonderful it is to have this new edition of *Walks and Talks*.

The great imperialist

David Gilmour
Curzon: Imperial Statesman.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
684 pages, $45

reviewed by Deepak Lal

This long but splendid biography of George Nathaniel Curzon is worth reading, if for no other reason than that the problems Curzon wrestled with in Asia, at the apogee of the British empire, continue to haunt its successor—the current U.S. imperium. His tempestuous life reads like a Greek tragedy. Along with incomparable gifts of intellect and boundless energy, he inherited an arrogance that ultimately led to both his triumphs and eventual disappointment. Because Curzon was a member of the aris-

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tocratic circle providing the leaders of the Tory party during the high noon of the Victorian era, his political life provides a portrait of this age. Its Platonic Guardians—of whom Curzon was the most notable—ruled an empire on which the sun never set. They were trained in the Imperial nurseries of the public schools, mainly Eton, and in the ancient universities of Oxbridge, in particular Balliol College, Oxford. British politics was governed as much by schoolboy relationships as by policy. Curzon's personal life was fueled by a powerful libido and was notable not only for its many adulterous affairs but also for not one but two marriages to American heiresses. Curzon's amorous adventures marked a turning point in the imperial family, with the Old World's landed aristocracy relying increasingly on maintaining its economic predominance through the wealth of the rising mercantile aristocracy of the New.

The eldest son of a landed aristocrat, Lord Scarsdale, and heir to one of the grandest country houses of England—Kedleston Hall—Curzon, born in 1859, was a brilliant student of the classics at Eton and Balliol. By the age of twenty, both his teachers and contemporaries spoke of him as a future Prime Minister. But his boundless self-confidence, bordering on arrogance, hindered his progress. He was lampooned by his Balliol contemporaries in the famous verse:

> My name is George Nathaniel Curzon,
> I am a most superior person,
> My cheek is pink, my hair is sleek,
> I dine at Blenheim once a week.

In his twenties he became a Member of Parliament and also embarked on a remarkable and extensive series of journeys around Asia. Between 1887 and his marriage to the American heiress Mary Leiter in 1895, he traveled to Japan, China, India, Central Asia, Persia, Mesopotamia, and Afghanistan. In the course of his Central Asian travels he discovered the source of the Oxus, and everywhere he went he immersed himself in the history and culture of the peoples he saw. He wrote large books about these journeys, and by the age of thirty-six he was the country's leading authority on Asian affairs. He was the most traveled man in the British Cabinet. But his frequent reference to his own expertise, and its lack among those expounding on Asian issues, did not endear him to his colleagues. As a result, even when his views were the best considered, he rarely had his way.

At the age of forty, Curzon became Queen Victoria's last Viceroy of India, ruling as the Imperial proconsul over 300 million people. His Viceroyalty ended with a dramatic resignation following the machinations of the Commander-in-Chief of India, Lord Kitchener—the hero of Khartoum who had avenged the murder of General Gordon by the Mahdi. Ten years in the political wilderness followed, until he became Foreign Secretary in the last decades of his life during and after the First World War. But he was thwarted in his ambition to become Prime Minister when King George V, who had developed a personal aversion to him, chose to set aside Curzon's claim to the office by nominating the relatively unknown and unprepossessing Stanley Baldwin instead. His political life ultimately ended in failure.

Nor was his personal life any more satisfying. Afflicted from an early age with neuralgic problems caused by a curvature of the spine, he lived in constant pain—frequently spending days on his back, and often in a steel cage set to straighten his spine. This gave him the stiff and erect posture, combined with his natural arrogance, that became the caricaturists' delight. After a series of tempestuous affairs, where he followed the practice of his class in having adulterous liaisons with friends' wives, but not having affairs with unmarried girls, he married Mary Leiter. She was the daughter of a Chicago millionaire and philanthropist, Levi Zeigler Leiter, and provided Curzon with the financial means to pursue his parliamentary career. The money also allowed

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him to buy and refurbish many grand houses and live in the style of a magnifico. His marriage was a success, largely because of Mary's enduring and unquestioning love, and despite what modern-day feminists would consider his male chauvinist behavior. After her early death at the age of thirty-six, he continued his adulterous affairs, most notably with the novelist Elinor Glyn. She described the fascination he held for women. "Curzon was 'superbly virile, vital and voluptuous,' a 'most passionate lover' and so 'physically attractive' that he aroused passion even in casual friendships."

In 1917, Curzon married a second American heiress, Grace Duggan, who unlike Mary had nothing in common with him, except an equally powerful libido. She failed after various miscarriages to provide him with the son and heir he craved. His relationships with his children, except with his stepdaughter Marcella, were poisoned by continual disputes about money, and he died at sixty-five a disappointed and lonely man. Successful human relationships seemed to have eluded him for most of his life.

It is the two periods when he was Viceroy of India and later Foreign Secretary during and after the First World War that have contemporary relevance. The major threat to Britain's Indian empire for much of the nineteenth century came from the expanding Russian empire and its desire for a warm-water port for its navy. Curzon, in his travels in Asia, and as Viceroy of India, was a prominent participant in this "Great Game" to check Russia's southward advance. He created a series of buffer states under the British sphere of influence between the Russians and the Indian Empire. One of the most important was Afghanistan, through which the British largely succeeded in containing Russian influence.

But on the borders between India and Afghanistan there were the unruly tribal areas of the Pathans, where the Indian empire was defended by a string of forts. These could, however, be easily overwhelmed. Curzon devised a novel policy for the defense of this area. He withdrew the troops from the advanced positions and concentrated them in the rear.

> His way of managing the Pathan tribesmen . . . was one of getting to understand him, and getting him to understand you; to leave him alone where his country is not wanted for purposes of Indian defense; where it is, to enlist and employ him in looking after his own country, and after the roads and passes which it is necessary for us to keep open; to pay him when he behaves, but to lay him out flat when he does not.

In 1901 he thus created the North West Frontier Province which separated the Pathan tribesmen from the inhabitants of the plains.

The successor state to the Indian empire in the west, Pakistan, maintained this policy, until the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, when the Pakistani intelligence services, along with the CIA, co-opted the tribesmen for their "jihad" against the Communist infidels. This area also became the home to the *madrassas*, set up with Saudi money, which created the wild theocrats of the Taliban. Despite the defeat of the Taliban and al Quada, this unruly border region has provided sanctuary for these *jihadis* against the West. The Pakistanis and the Americans face the same problem that Curzon faced, namely how to tame these tribes who have for so long been allowed to go their own way. Another Curzon with the imagination to co-opt these tribes in the "war on terror" is needed before it can be won in the region.

The other area in which Curzon's views were sound but fated to fail was in the reconstruction of the Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The trouble began with Lord Kitchener of Khartoum, who had become Secretary of War in Asquith's war cabinet at the start of the First World War. Kitchener wanted to seize the Arabic-speaking parts of the Ottoman empire for the British, thereby creating a

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Middle Eastern empire to link and rival their empire in India. Recognizing the importance but misunderstanding the nature of Islam, he sought to capture the religious leadership in the form of the Caliphate from the Turks for the Arabs, whom he expected to manipulate in the interests of the secular British power. He chose the Hashemite Sheriff of Mecca—a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed—for this role. But Kitchener had not understood that in Islam there is no separation between the Church and State. When the Sheriff of Mecca was offered the Caliphate, he naturally assumed he was being offered the kingdom of the Arabic-speaking peoples of the Ottoman empire. This infuriated Ibn Saud, the leader of the rival and fiercely puritanical Wahabbi sect of Islam. He conquered the Hejaz, displacing the Hashemite Sheriff, whose successors were then offered newly created thrones in the British-created states of Trans-Jordan and Iraq as consolation prizes.

Curzon by contrast was "skeptical of proposals for an Arab caliphate and a tribal revolt in Arabia. [H]e deprecated the idea of promising the Arabs an enormous state on former Ottoman territory." He was also against Kitchener's plan to raid Baghdad in 1917 and was proved correct when the expedition ended in disaster. Part of the reason for the failure was the result of his defeat against Kitchener in India, which had led to his resignation as viceroy. Kitchener had in an act of self-aggrandizement wanted the posts of Indian Commander-in-Chief and the bureaucratic office of the Military member of the Viceroy's council to be combined. Curzon opposed this, but Kitchener, as result of various intrigues in London, had his way. It was this turning of the Indian Commander-in-Chief into a bureaucrat who never even went out to the Iraqi front but was holed up in Simla, which in large part led to the disaster in Baghdad. Again, Curzon had been unfortunately vindicated.

Curzon was also against the "commitments made to other peoples [in the region] in the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration." The former sought to divide the Ottoman Empire into French and British spheres of influence. The latter promised the Jews a homeland in the British-mandated territory of Palestine.

> The debate over the Balfour Declaration was one of a series between 1905 and 1923 in which Curzon won the argument and Balfour won the battle. As with India and Mesopotamia, Curzon was familiar with the area and its inhabitants, and this experience made him doubt that they could absorb a Jewish influx from Europe: indeed he predicted, accurately as it happened, that Zionism could not be established, without the removal of many of the native Arabs.

So why did Balfour and, even more so, Lloyd George press vociferously and successfully for a Jewish homeland? Gilmour's answer that Balfour "was a Zionist because he admired Weizmann and Jewish culture and because he hoped to see in Palestine a sort of modern equivalent of Classical Athens" does not ring true. A more convincing answer is provided by David Fromkin in *A Peace to End All Peace* (1989). Fromkin argues that, despite the endemic anti-Semitism of the British upper classes, various British statesmen, including Lord Palmerston and above all Lloyd George, were influenced by the nonconformist and evangelical tradition. They believed that according to the Scriptures the advent of the Messiah would occur once the people of Judaea were restored to their native land.

The U.S. has seemingly taken on, however unwillingly, the burdens of empire from the British. Its current and future proconsuls dealing with that vast area of Asia, of which Curzon had detailed personal knowledge, could do no better than follow in his footsteps, by combining a detailed and often romantic appreciation of the cultures of the region, with the Platonic ideal to be the Guardians, whose sole purpose was impartially to maintain order and justice in unruly lands.

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Nothing shabby

Penelope Fitzgerald
The Afterlife: Essays & Criticism.
Counterpoint, 320 pages, $26.95

reviewed by Alexandra Mullen

The tale of Cinderella tugs at us in many directions, so that even after we've long outgrown the glass-slipper version of virtue rewarded we might very well respond to it in other guises. Jane Austen's Cinderella variations still entertain me. But as far as wish-fulfillment goes, I lean toward tales of the Late Bloomer who finally gets to go to the ball and pip the prize. Take, for instance, Penelope Fitzgerald. Her first book, a biography, appeared when she was almost sixty. By the time of her death in 2000 at the age of eighty-three, she had written two more biographies and nine novels: three were shortlisted for the Booker, another won it, and her last novel won the National Book Critic's Award. Appropriately for someone who also dabbled in ghost stories, even death appears to be unable to stop her momentum. A *Selected Prose* has already appeared, and volumes of letters and other writings are in the works. Just published is an aptly named collection of her essays and reviews on literary subjects, *The Afterlife*.

In an essay on C. S. Lewis, Fitzgerald notes that for him "books were not an alternative but an additional life." The title chosen by the editors—Terence Dooley with Christopher Carduff and Mandy Kirkby—is itself an example of the afterlife of books: they're quoting Fitzgerald quoting the Everyman motto quoting Milton's *Areopagitica*: "A good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life." These funerary offerings are a varied lot: essays on "master-spirits"; standard-length notices of witnesses to some of this last century's horrors and of novelists such as John McGahern, Roddie Doyle, and Carol Shields; odd paragraphs written to fill some magazine niche; essays on the literary milieux of Hampstead, Bloomsbury, and the Poetry Bookshop; and finally, and most enticingly, pieces about her family and childhood, her writing and method. What kind of afterlife do these tokens point to? What precious life-blood is here embalmed?

At one point, Fitzgerald identifies herself in a throwaway line as a "common reader." This is a very misleading, perhaps disingenuous, claim. To begin with, she was a scion of the ferociously bookish Knox clan; her step-grandmother's diary entry for her marriage day read "Finished *Antigone*; Married Bishop." Other family members, besides her two Bishop grandfathers, were her uncles Wilfred (a saintly Anglo-Catholic clergyman—he never lied because "he never saw the necessity"), Ronald (Catholic priest and mystery novelist), Dillwyn (classicist and cryptographer), and her father Edmund (parodic versifier and editor of *Punch*). Miss Knox graduated from Somerville College at Oxford with honors and at various times of her life taught literature as well. There was nothing ordinary about the way she read books. Still, her comment can be read as a declaration of allegiances. She does indeed read to find what's common to human life and conversation. If in the quest she finds herself in the verges, surely that is only human, all too human. Fitzgerald wears her learning so lightly that it can seem invisible, but there is always about her sentences a penumbra of a curious mind to whom nothing human is foreign, a mind engaged and detached, of the world and outside it.

Fitzgerald's quality of mind doesn't much show itself in argument or even in exposition—she dispatches with the biographical facts of the authors she's considering with almost indecent haste. But we can get a sense of it in other ways. Personally reticent, she often wrote on authors of similar temperament, if not style, to her own: Jane Austen, Margaret Oliphant, E. M. Delafield, Barbara Pym. It is tempting to read her comments on them as providing oblique clues to her own view of the world. What she says of reading Barbara Pym is

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obviously true of her as well: "We have to keep alert, because she will never say exactly what we expect." But absurd as it is to have to say it, Fitzgerald's thoughts about these writers are most valuable for providing insights into *them*. These writers are much loved by common readers and, with the recent exception of Austen, critically invisible. They don't provide professional talkers with much to talk about. Fitzgerald, however, is always illuminating on those writers who, like M. R. James, have a "habit not to make too much of things."

Fitzgerald wrote quite a bit, for instance, on Margaret Oliphant. When Mrs. Oliphant is read now, it's usually as an Austen or Trollope substitute, but her domestic fiction has its own flavor. Fitzgerald singles out this tangy line: "next to happiness, perhaps enmity is the most healthful stimulus of the human mind." She is very astute at delineating Mrs. Oliphant's "moral atmosphere": "warm, rueful, based on hard experience, tolerant just when we might not expect it." The facts of Mrs. Oliphant's life—Fitzgerald calls her the "patron saint of all kitchen-table novelists"—easily lend themselves to both aggrieved and sanctimonious retellings, but Fitzgerald pays her the respect of one unsentimental novelist to another.

One of her greatest gifts as a reader is also a teacher's gift—holding out the encapsulating quotation that everyone else has somehow read over. There's the thrill of prestidigitation about it, and the chill of revelation too. What could be more revealing about the laconic Charlotte Mew than to learn her favorite joke—"a hearse-driver runs over a man and kills him, and a passerby shouts: 'Greedy!'" George Moore's bravado lies exposed when, in a pet at the publicity around the death of Zola, a chief inspiration for his own naturalistic novels, he pouts, "Anybody can get himself asphyxiated." Fitzgerald's gift is more than a party trick, though. The treasures she pulls out of her hat show the way to a real appreciation of each person's particular genius. Here is what she makes of the ballerina Lydia Lopokova's letters to her husband, Maynard Keynes:

> At the end of the letters there are endearments invented for her Maynarochka: "I have no chemise. I touch your bosom without a shirt," "Your pale chaffinch," "If it is cold where you are, as it is here, I warm you with my foxy licks," "Recurrent dismals of sympathy," "The jolts from my heart for you." Lydia's cunning misuse of the English language enchants Maynard, and sometimes, out of tenderness, he tries to imitate it, but cannot. . . . [These letters] have the kind of warmth that, in *To the Lighthouse*, frightens Lily, the detached artist. "They turned on her cheek the heat of love. . . . It scorched her and she flinched."

And, from a very different universe, here she is on the dowdier domestic product Barbara Pym, like Lopokova only in her ability to "guard against sentimentality."

> She is the writer who points out "the desire to do good without much personal inconvenience that lurks in most of us," the regrettable things said between friends and "the satisfaction which is to be got from saying precisely things of that kind," the irritation we feel "when we have made up our minds to dislike people for no apparent reason and they perform a kind action." But toward her characters she shows a creator's charity. She understands them so well that the least she can do is to forgive them.

Surely this is true of Fitzgerald as well. Her clear-sightedness about our lot is not the solely clinical kind, where every motive lies naked and shivering, barely recognizable as human. She is ever alert to the "comic and pathetic tension" behind our attempts at self-knowledge, however ineffectual. In her work as well as her life, she appears to have shared the opinion of a figure she greatly admired, William Morris: "A determination to do nothing shabby . . . appears to me to be the socialist religion, and if it is not morality I do not know what is."

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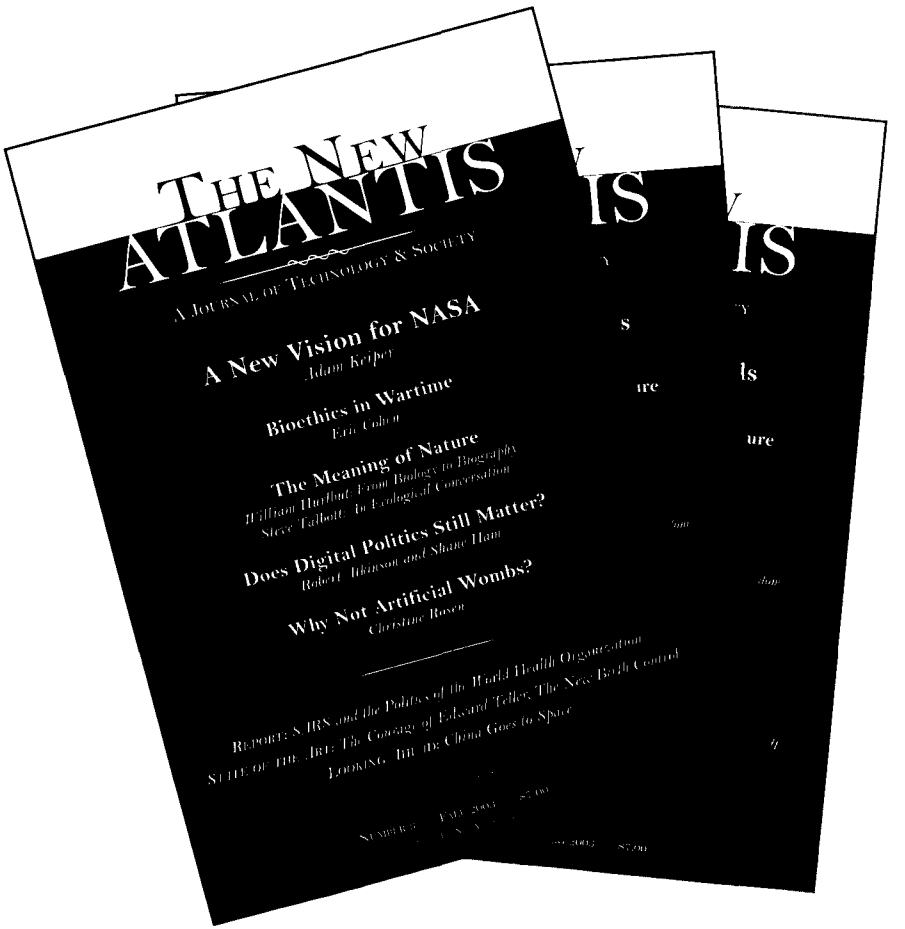
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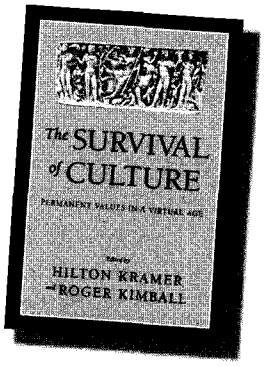
A critical fever chart of our age

HILTON KRAMER AND ROGER KIMBALL, EDITORS

The Survival of Culture

Permanent Values in a Virtual Age



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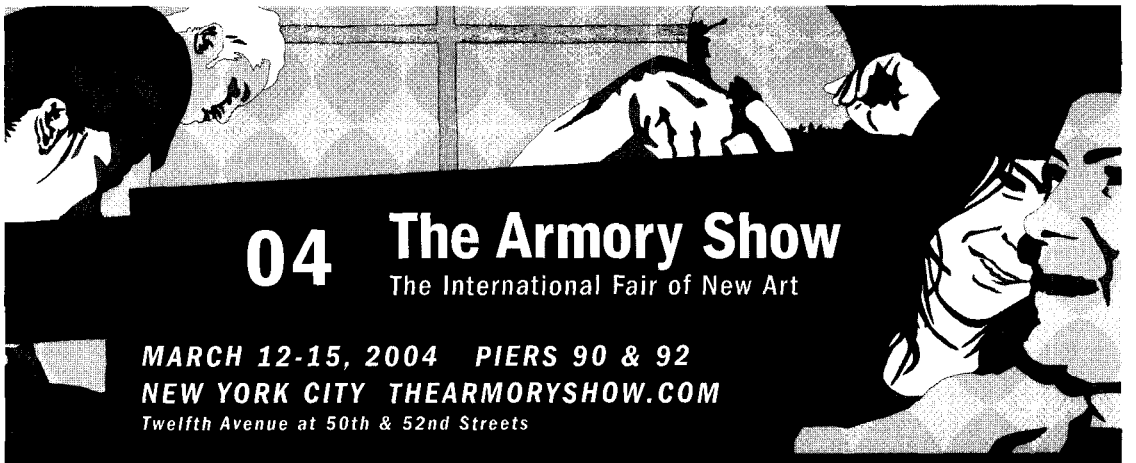

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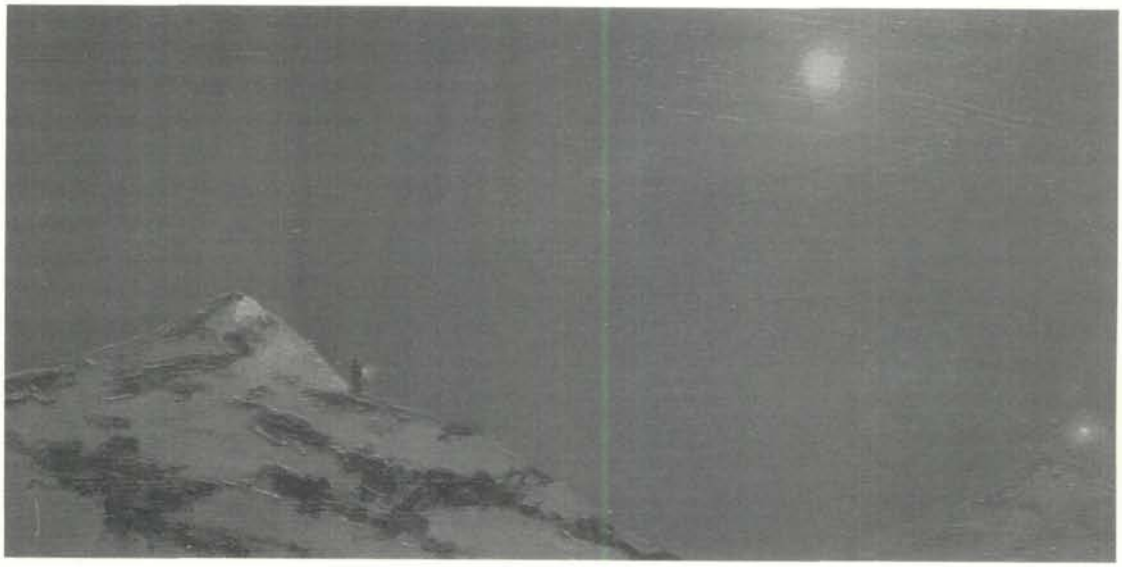
ADAM STRAUS

WE'VE GOTTEN UP HERE AND WE CAN'T GET DOWN



ADAM STRAUS, A SMALL BUT GREAT DIVIDE, 2003 oil on matte board 13 x 16 in.

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